University of Alberta

Charismatic Attraction and Legitimacy within John de Ruiter's New Religious Movement

by

Paul Joosse ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Sociology

Edmonton, Alberta
Fall, 2006

Library and Archives Canada

Published Heritage Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et Archives Canada

Direction du Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-22161-7
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-22161-7

NOTICE:
The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:
L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

Abstract

This thesis closely examines the new religious movement led by John de Ruiter, specifically focusing on the charismatic relationships that provide cohesion within the movement. Taking direction from Max Weber's conception of charismatic attraction, which views as necessary both a) the representation of a leader as divine or extraordinary, and b) the performance of miraculous acts, I look at John de Ruiter' charismatic bonds with devotees from these two respective angles. First, I examine the *quality* of leader John de Ruiter's divine representation, and describe the variety of methods that the group uses to maintain the primacy of this image in an arena that contains many non-official, non-divine representations. Second, I explore the importance of interpersonal silence to de Ruiter's performance of seemingly *miraculous* feats. I couch my analysis of de Ruiter's silent stares in a three-pronged theoretical model of interpersonal silence that I have developed based on a synthesis of insights from various communications theorists.

Table of contents

1. **Introduction and Research Approach**

Introduction to the study 1

Methodology..... 5

The Interviews 8

A Brief Description of the Hermeneutic Process 11

Evaluating Interpretive Accounts 13

Ethical Considerations 14

Conclusion 18

2. **A History of John de Ruiter and the Group he Founded**

John de Ruiter's Religious Career 19

Early Religious Experiences and Training 19

A Student No Longer: de Ruiter as Enlightened Teacher ...28

The de Ruiter Group: Various Aspects 31

Culture 31

Belief System 35

Worship Site and Form of Worship 43

Revenue 45

Recruitment 48

Conclusion 51

3. **Competing Representations of John de Ruiter and the Politics of Extraordinary Claims**

Introduction: The Difficulty of Presenting the Charismatic Self in

Everyday Life 52

John the Divinity: a Three-Stage Evolution 54

Stage One: a Messenger of Christ 54

Stage Two: a Christ Figure 57

State Three: a Living Embodiment of Truth 61

Non-divine Representations of de Ruiter 68

John the Deviant: Morally Depraved and Mad 68

John the 'Ordinary Guy' 75

John the Philosopher 80

Intra-Group Impression-Management Strategies 83

Conclusion 93

4. **The Charismatic significance of John de Ruiter's Silence at de Ruiter Group Meetings**

Introduction 95

The Precedent of Gurus' Use of Silence within Charismatic Relationships 97

Silence: a Medium of Projection and Inference 102

Silence: a Punitive/Dependency-Fostering Tool 106

Silence: The Lack of 'Small Talk' and Intimacy 112

Conclusion 117

5. **Concluding Remarks**

Limitations of the Study and Paths for Further Research 119

Contributions of the Study 120

References 123

Appendix A 131

Chapter One: Introduction and Research Approach

Introduction to the Study

John de Ruiter is a man of few words and humble origins. The son of Dutch immigrants, he grew up in the small Canadian prairie town of Stettler, Alberta, earning his living as a shoemaker. He is not a person one would expect to see leading a "worldwide phenomenon" (Piercey 2001). Over the past decade, however, his burgeoning new religious movement (NRM) has become just that. Claiming to be "a living embodiment of truth" (de Ronde 2000: 3-4), he is now one of the fastest rising stars on the international guru circuit (Hutchinson 2001: 32). Thousands attend his meetings worldwide, regularly filling theatres and halls in the UK, Germany, the USA, and Australia. Furthermore, many have chosen to follow him home, leaving their countries to join hundreds of other fulltime devotees who now live near him in the northern Canadian city of Edmonton, Alberta (Hutchinson 2001: 32).

As with all religious[1] organizations, 'the de Ruiter' group'[2] consists of a network of social relationships among members. It is very clear, however, that not all of these relationships are equal. Members who join the group—

---

[1] For the purpose of this thesis, I use Stark and Bainbridge's definition of religion, i.e. that, "religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, or force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural" (1985: 5).

[2] I refer to the group in this way because so far members have not given themselves a collective name. In the course of my research, I have heard people refer to members as "Johnnies" and "John people." Reporter Scott McKeen referred to devotees as "John-ites" (2003: B1). I choose to avoid these monikers because they might sound flippant or pejorative. My naming strategy does fall in line with the three monikers listed above in one important respect, however: it references the name of the leader, indicating the centrality of John de Ruiter to the movement. 'Oasis' is also an appellation regularly associated with the group, but it actually refers to de Ruiter's privately-owned company, Oasis Edmonton Inc. To call the entire group this would thus be misleading.

especially those hailing from other countries—most often do so because of a specific personal attraction to John de Ruiter, rather than attractions to the community generally, or to other devotees. Said devotee Eroca Hunter of de Ruiter, "I have waited my whole life to meet such a one" (quoted in McKeen 2000: E8). As I will show throughout this thesis, de Ruiter's relationships with devotees involve a *charismatic* attraction, the basis of which is de Ruiter's reputed superhuman status. The research question that guides this thesis then, is, 'how do de Ruiter and his group work to preserve the legitimacy of these charismatic bonds and create a climate that is conducive to the formation of *new* bonds?'

Chapter one introduces the project, gives an account of the methodology I employ, describes my data collection techniques, and discusses the various ethical considerations that I undertook in preparation for the project.

Chapter two provides a comprehensive description of the de Ruiter group, its culture, its belief system, its worship site, its forms of worship, and its revenue generating and recruitment strategies. I also include in this chapter a biography of de Ruiter himself, paying special attention to accounts of his earliest spiritual experiences, to his religious training (both formal and self-directed), and finally, to his eventual founding and charismatic enmeshment with what would become the de Ruiter group.

Chapters three and four comprise my analysis of charisma within the de Ruiter group. Weber's conception of charismatic authority consists of two main components. First, a leader must represent him/herself as being

"endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1947: 358). Second, the *plausibility* of this representation hinges on the ability of the leader to produce 'signs' or 'proof' of a supernatural status on a continual basis. While the bureaucratic or traditional leader can count on routine to assure legitimacy, routine is toxic to charismatic leadership (Weber 1958: 51). 'Resting on laurels' is not possible because:

> [i]f proof of his charismatic qualification fails him for long, the leader endowed with charisma tends to think his god or his magical or heroic powers have deserted him. If he is for long unsuccessful, above all if his leadership fails to benefit his followers, it is likely that his charismatic authority will disappear (Weber 1947: 49-50).

Thus, a comprehensive analysis of legitimacy within charismatic relationships will involve descriptions of both the *quality* of a leader's divine/extraordinary representations, as well as the *methods of proof* that charismatic leaders use to maintain worthiness of such representations (in the eyes of devotees).

Using the de Ruiter group as a case study, this thesis project seeks to undertake such an analysis, and I attempt to perform the two tasks listed above in chapters three and four. Chapter three focuses on the arena in which there is competition among *various* representations of de Ruiter, while chapter four focuses on proofs that make the divine representation viable and plausible in it own right.

In chapter three, I examine the qualities of the different representations of de Ruiter that have been generated over the many years of his ministry. The

discourses found in public spheres, in the media, amongst his devotees, his critics, and his more intimate associates, have contributed to this variety of representations, and thus are the subject of analysis. I take direction from Kent's (1990) work on normative strategies and deviance labeling that groups use in their efforts to gain societal legitimacy, as well as from Goffman's work on 'the presentation of the self' by people and groups trying to cultivate favorable images. The chapter begins by outlining the representation that sees de Ruiter as divine and traces the evolution of this divine representation by presenting it in three successive stages as they occurred over time: de Ruiter as the *messenger of Christ*, de Ruiter as a *Christ figure*, and the post-Christian image—de Ruiter as a *Living Embodiment of Truth*. I then examine three common alternative representations and see that while two of these are inherently antithetical to the divine representation, one is complimentary. Finally, I use dramaturgical analysis to look at some impression management strategies that de Ruiter employs during group meetings. I find that these strategies focus on negotiating among the four different representations that I outline in the chapter, and have thus far been successful in maintaining the primacy of the divine representation amongst devotees.

Chapter four addresses the second task—a description of 'methods of continual proof'—by examining the importance of de Ruiter's silence and staring to his ability to perform seemingly *miraculous feats* for his devotees. I contend that three aspects/qualities of interpersonal silence enable de Ruiter to perform such feats, which in turn make plausible his "'status beyond human'"

(Kent quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 34). I couch my analysis of de Ruiter's silent stares in a three-pronged theoretical model I have developed based on a synthesis of insights from different communications theorists. First, I contend that the *projection-eliciting* aspect of interpersonal silence fosters the belief within devotees that de Ruiter has the ability to speak to the specific personal needs of people whom he has never met. Second, silence's *punitive* aspect enables de Ruiter to perform superhuman displays of power over others at meetings. Third, de Ruiter's use of silence fosters the belief that he has a miraculous ability to form *intimate bonds* with complete strangers, simply by gazing at them. Thus, chapters three and four comprise an analysis of the complimentary strategies that de Ruiter and his group use in the maintenance of charismatic legitimacy, both in terms of combating non-divine representations of de Ruiter, and in terms of miracle performances.

Methodology

The methodology that I use for this study is qualitative, and it fits under the wide umbrella term of *interpretive inquiry*. Qualitative research is particularly useful where a researcher is interested in exploring a phenomenon from the insider's, or *emic*, perspective (Merriam 1998), working holistically "to discern the intent or meaning behind another's expression" (Ellis 1998: 15). Because my research deals with representations and perceptions of de Ruiter and his devotees, I decided that a qualitative approach would be most suitable here.

As Miles and Huberman point out, there are "few agreed-upon canons for qualitative data analysis, in the sense of shared ground rules for drawing conclusions and verifying their sturdiness" (1984: 16). With projects characterized as interpretive inquiry, perhaps one tendency is that they tend to be *eclectic* in terms of the methodologies they employ. Interpretive inquiry, as defined by Denzin and Lincoln, "crosscuts disciplines, fields and subject matter" (1994:1). For this reason, the researcher needs to be someone who tries to apply the *best* method to a particular aspect of the phenomenon of interest, even if the use of this method was not an intention of the original plans for the study.

Thus, in Denzin and Lincoln's description, the interpretive inquirer is a *bricoleur*—someone who is practical and focused on the problem at hand, producing a bricolage that is a "pieced together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation" (Denzin and Lincoln 1994: 2).

Because of the inherently creative nature of this piecing-together, the bricoleur will recognize that the bricolage that he or she constructs will be different from the constructions of other researchers who might undertake to examine the same phenomenon. Indeed, the bricolage that the researcher constructs will even be specific to the particular period of the researcher's life, and will be different each time he or she revisits the phenomenon. In direct contrast to the positivist's dream, "one's aim becomes an expanding repertoire

of alternative descriptions rather than One Right Description" (Ellis 1998: 9, citing Rorty 1989: 40).

Patton views qualitative methods as consisting of three different forms of data collection: 1) in-depth, open-ended interviews, 2) direct observations, and 3) analysis of written documents (1990: 10). This thesis project incorporates all three of these methods. My analysis focuses on written materials such as those produced by the group,[3] various popular press articles (see bibliography), the group's website, court documents, various weblogs produced by those who have attended meetings, and one of Stephen A. Kent's interviews with a member (see bibliography). It also includes my observations of audio and videotaped de Ruiter group meetings.[4] Finally, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with former members of the group, all of which had spent at least a six-month period as a member. I acquired some of this information through access to the Stephen A. Kent collection on alternative religions, housed at the University of Alberta, where I also obtained information about other 'gurus' who used techniques similar to de Ruiter's in relation to their followers.

To analyze the data I collected, I used aspects of content analysis and grounded theory. Content analysis involves generating themes through "identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton

---

[3] These materials include de Ruiter's book, *Unveiling Reality*, which consists of several group meetings transcribed and organized into chapters. I also have several other publications of the group, such as volunteer forms, retreat registration forms, introductory pamphlets etc. (see bibliography under 'Oasis').

[4] I have access to over seven hours of video-taped meetings and over twenty hours of audio-taped meetings (for a selection of some of these, see the bibliography under 'Oasis').

1990: 381). Grounded theory, with its roots in symbolic interactionism, is similar to qualitative content analysis in that it aims to generate theory from raw data through coding schemes. An additional characteristic of grounded theory is "constant comparison," where "all pieces of data are compared with other data" (Morse 1995: 27-28). As I analyzed transcriptions of interviews and other textual data, I noted possible themes and emerging concepts in the margins of the documents. I then expanded and refined these themes and concepts as I compared them with each other and with non-textual data. Eventually, the key themes and concepts that emerged became the theoretical categories that now give structure to chapters three and four.

The Interviews

In the process of interpretive inquiry, the researcher acknowledges that he or she is *a part* of the world of his or her participant, not *apart* from it. In qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, the "researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam 1998: 7). Thus, the researcher's role is crucial, and rather than attempting to remove him or herself from the situation, "the researcher must physically go to the people, setting, site, institution (the field) in order to observe behavior in its natural setting" (Merriam 1998: 7). The product of such encounters is never—as those within the positivist paradigm might say—an objective representation of the participant's views, but rather the result of a *negotiation and co-creation* of meanings between the interviewer and his or her participant. Since entry to

the actual site of worship is not feasible,[5] I determined that interviewing former members was the best way to access the experiences of the charismatic aspects of relationships within the de Ruiter group.

The interviews were fairly unstructured and conversational in nature. I devised a list of questions, but for the most part, I refrained from directly asking them unless I felt by the end of the interview that they still needed asking. I took notes during the interviews and I recorded and transcribed the conversations.

I allowed an hour to an hour and a half for each interview, and conducted some short (fifteen minute to a half and hour) follow-up interviews over the phone. These shorter interviews provided me with an opportunity to ask any additional questions that came to light as I transcribed and examined the transcriptions. I negotiated sites for the interviews on an individual basis with each participant. I did this with the aim of giving my participants a chance to pick a site in which they felt most comfortable.

I gave my participants a pre-interview activity a week prior to the scheduled interviews. The activities I designed did not require much work on the part of participants, and I expected that they would take only fifteen minutes to complete. Some participants took the activities quite seriously and put much effort into them, while others made less of an effort. I gave participants a choice of one of three activities, all the while making it clear

[5] Signs outside of the meeting hall ask that no research or reporting activities be conducted at the site.

that they could also choose *not* to do an activity. The activity choices that I provided were:

a) make a picture representing how you experienced the silences during group meetings.

b) make a picture representing any aspect of your involvement with the group.

c) make a timeline that outlines your involvement with the group and your experiences during the different stages of involvement.

There are three reasons why I chose to give participants these pre-interview activities. First, I wanted to give participants a non-rational way to express how they experienced being a part of the group. Second, I hoped that these activities would encourage participants to start remembering their experiences and to start actively reflecting on these experiences in the week prior to the interview. Third, I hoped that the activities would serve as springboards for conversation during the interview itself.

Without recourse to the positivistic need to eliminate researcher bias, Packer and Addison assert that researchers must "show the entity, or more precisely, let it show itself, not forcing our perspective on it. And we must do this in a way that respects the *way* it shows itself" (1989: 278). This is by no means to imply that the researcher should try to eliminate or "bracket" his or her biases—the pretension that such attempts would be anything but futile is antithetical to the paradigm that interpretive inquiry inhabits. One implication of Packer and Addison's assertion that is vital, however, is that the

interpretive inquirer must at all times be careful when pulling quotes from transcriptions, checking and rechecking in order to perceive nuances and multifarious meanings, while avoiding the temptation of over-simplification for the benefit of the categories and codes that are developing. Indeed, the hermeneutical nature of my methodology called me to revisit the interview transcripts, the materials produced by the group, the secondary sources, and even my participants many times (in the follow-up interviews). This process was labour-intensive, but fruitful, and is described in detail below.

A Brief Description of the Hermeneutic Process

The process of interpretive research involves continuous reflection on the part of the researcher. Ellis (1998) uses the metaphor of the spiral in order to describe the development of an interpretive inquiry project. Rather than seeing inquiry as a linear project, the metaphor of the spiral acknowledges the back-and-forth way that the researcher relates to the data or participant. This back and forth motion, between the specific and the general, between the part and the whole, and between theory and experience is an important aspect of inquiry. Through these successive movements, the researcher moves in the direction of understanding. This does not mean, however, that the researcher will necessarily move in the direction of his or her original goal. Insights may shift the focus of the researcher's inquiry, and the spiral will head in a new direction that had not been obvious from the start, but that had made itself known through the process of reflection (Ellis 1998: 22). In hermeneutic

terms, the unexpected findings of particular loops are 'uncoverings' (Ellis 1998: 22). The idea of uncovering suggests that researchers facilitate the self-showing of the entity at which they are directing their inquiries.

There are usually numerous loops in an interpretive journey, and each successive loop gains its direction from questions that came to light in the previous loop. "One enters each loop, or separate inquiry, with a question. What one learns in the loop provides direction or a reframing of the question for the next loop" (Ellis 1998: 20). Each loop can represent a separate episode of data collection and analysis, or it may represent a return to the same data with a different question.

The structure of individual loops consists of a forward and backward arc. The forward arc occurs when the researcher tries to make sense of the entity under investigation with reference to everything that the researcher *brings* to the inquiry. This includes his or her beliefs, values, interpretive frameworks, pre-understandings etc. (Ellis 1998: 27). All of these things combine to form the "forestructure." Unlike those within the positivist paradigm who try to eliminate the influence of their forestructures because of the fear that they will contribute to bias, the interpretive inquirer sees the influence of the forestructure as unavoidable and regards it as an integral part of the path towards understanding.

"[I]n the backward arc, one evaluates the initial interpretation and attempts to see what went unseen before."(Ellis 1998: 26). Thus, a reciprocal dialogue transpires between the researcher's pre-understandings and the entity under

investigation. As the researcher uncovers more information, he or she alters the forestructure and incorporates this new information into his or her worldview. This new forestructure in turn generates new questions that will guide future re-examinations of the entity under investigation.

Evaluating Interpretive Accounts

Researchers within the positivist paradigm sought to evaluate their research through a process of *validation* – "evaluation in terms of interpretation-free norms and standards . . . [based on] a correspondence theory of truth" (Packer and Addison 1989: 275-276). The interpretive paradigm, however, does not allow for validation in these terms. The multi-method, triangulative, character of qualitative research is misguided if its aim is to capture an objective reality. I do not employ different methods with the assumption that, if one method (say, an analysis of interviews) is confirmative of the findings of another method (say, an analysis of taped meetings), this is grounds for assuming that I have then reached the *right* findings, in the sense of corresponding to a supposed objectively real world. Denzin and Lincoln write, "[o]bjective reality can never be captured. Triangulation is not a tool or strategy of validation, but an *alternative* to validation" (1994: 2 emphasis added).

Packer and Addison suggest that the evaluative methods that researchers applied to positivistic research still might be used to evaluate interpretive accounts, but not if they are directed at "the grail of validation" (1989: 288).

These four evaluative methods are: "requiring that an interpretive account be coherent; examining its relationship to external evidence; seeking consensus among various groups; and assessing the account's relationship to future events" (Packer and Addison 1989: 279-280). Thus Packer and Addison salvage some evaluative tools from the positivist paradigm while making clear that they avoid any naïve-realist assumptions that posit an objective reality which is apart from those who are involved with it. Though the evaluative methods they list "are not ways of validating . . . they are ways we can consider whether what has been uncovered in an interpretive inquiry answers the practical, concernful question that directed the inquiry" (Packer and Addison 1989: 289).

Ethical Considerations

The self-conception of the researcher involved in interpretive inquiry reflects his or her constructivist assumptions. Researchers within the interpretive paradigm do not subscribe to the positivist characterization of the researcher-participant relationship as one between an expert and a subject. The locus of meaning is not a researcher's previously held, abstract, theoretical framework, into which he or she makes the participant's experiences fit. Thus, rather than the "expert-subject" relationship, the researcher will see him/herself more as a *co-researcher* with participants.

All research that involves human beings should assess the risks that harm might come to participants through their participation in the study. The

researcher should use such assessments to take measures that will ensure that such harm does not occur. Most basic among these measures involves the informed consent of participants. Informed consent allows participants to determine *for themselves* whether participation in a study is likely to be psychologically, emotionally, or otherwise injurious. All of my participants read an introductory letter to the project and signed a consent form (see appendix A) before participating in interviews with me. At certain times during some of my interviews, participants felt inclined to speak about certain subjects while requesting that the content of these discussions not appear in this thesis. I have honored all of these requests.

Another harm-preventative strategy is to keep the participants anonymous to readers of the study through the use of pseudonyms and by omitting any information that could identify the participants to others. Often, the researcher will present a guarantee of anonymity to participants as a condition of their participation in the study. Very early in the planning of my project I realized that, while I certainly attempt to protect the identities of interviewees, there are several reasons why I should choose not to *guarantee* anonymity.

First, the group is relatively small and cohesive. Because of these factors, it is reasonable to assume that, despite my attempts to disguise the identities of participants (through pseudonyms etc.), a good chance still exists that group members, who know them very well, would be able to identify them. I anticipated that in quoting participants, there would be aspects of the quotes that might give away their identities in ways that I as a researcher could not

possibly have foreseen. An example: if one of my participants were to be fond of a particular expression or word, members who know this person well would notice this usage, even though I could not have known that the expression or word in question was a 'tell-tale' sign of someone's identity. Thus, given that people in the group generally know each other very well, I think that it would be foolhardy to *guarantee* anonymity.

Second, sometimes the special insights that particular participants might have to offer would lose weight if I were to refer to their experiences in only the most general of terms. I want to present my participants as people who were truly connected to, and invested in, the group. For example, two of my participants have experiences that go back to early periods of de Ruiter's movement. While this heavily committed and long-term investment in the group makes these participants' views weightier and more useful from a research outlook, this also makes more difficult the researcher's ability to *guarantee* anonymity.

Third, the sampling method that I chose to use, snowball sampling, meant that the identities of those I was likely to interview were not completely anonymous. Again, because of this reality, I had to stop short of *guaranteeing* anonymity.

My decision to quote from web logs also required ethical consideration, mainly because this medium is so new, and it is difficult to find precedent for their use in social scientific research. Web logs (or blogs), have the seemingly paradoxical nature of being personal and diary-like, while at the

same time being posted worldwide on the Internet. Blogs often allow for responses by viewers, and can lead to lengthy and complex discussions amongst participants in the blog. Some blogs require viewers to agree to a host of conditions before they can log on, while others are completely public, as accessible as any webpage. All of the blogs I cite in my thesis are of this latter type.

Persons who publish in blogs face a number of risks. First, there is a risk that any personal information that they disclose will have unforeseen and unintended psychological, emotional, or other consequences for them. To put it simply, there is the risk that what they write will 'come back to haunt them.' In addition, there is the risk that persons who publish in blogs could offend others, leading to retributive actions (legal or otherwise) by those offended.

When the blogger publishes online, the implication is that he or she assumes these risks. The *proliferation*, however, of the content of blogs into other forms of media (which is effectively what this thesis does) could potentially increase these risks by making the material accessible to *different* audiences, and *more* accessible to current audiences.

In my estimation, the fact that I intend to publish content from some blogs does not lead to a substantial increase in risk for bloggers. The information in the blogs is already available on what is perhaps the most accessible form of media, the Internet. Anyone, anywhere in the world with access to the Internet, can view these pages. The inclusion of some blog-content in a considerably less accessible medium (a thesis) thus does not represent a

substantial increase of the aforementioned risks. My assessment, then, is that risks of harm to bloggers resulting from citing blogs in my thesis are minimal.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined in a very broad sense the research design for this thesis, while not giving much detail about the group that is at the centre of the study. The next chapter thus provides a foundation for the rest of the thesis by reviewing de Ruiter's biographical information and by giving detailed descriptions of various aspects of the group that he founded.

Chapter Two: A History of John de Ruiter and the Group he Founded[6]

Introduction

This chapter provides a biography of John de Ruiter, paying particular attention to the group that he now leads. Accordingly, the chapter consists of two main sections. First, I give a description of de Ruiter's religious history. This history includes accounts of his earliest spiritual experiences, to his religious training (both formal and self-directed), and finally, to his eventual founding and charismatic enmeshment with what would become the de Ruiter group. Second, I give a description of the group proper, as it exists today. With this second aim in mind, I include sections on the group's culture, its belief system, its worship site, its forms of worship, and its revenue generating and recruitment strategies. Thus, this chapter is mainly biographically and ethnographically descriptive, and I intend for these descriptions to serve as a backdrop to the more theoretical arguments of chapters three and four.

John de Ruiter's Religious Career

Early Religious Experiences and Training

Born in 1959, John de Ruiter grew up with two sisters and one brother (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 4) in the home of his parents who were Catholic Dutch immigrants in the small Canadian prairie town of Stettler, Alberta

[6] Portions of this chapter appear in an article published in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (see Joosse 2006)

(Hutchinson 2001: 32). At the age of seventeen, de Ruiter reputedly had a revelatory experience that he would describe as:

> a knowing and experience of oneness with the source: an intimate universe on the inside and at the same time an equally intimate universe on the outside. I was conscious and clear between the two, yet I was being in the oneness of both at the same time. My awareness of reality expanded in ways that I could have never imagined. I experienced joy, love, and deep, inner rest, and I became dearly re-connected to a true way of being (de Ruiter 1999: xi-xii).

Written in 1999 as a part of the introduction to his book, *Unveiling Reality*, it is clear that de Ruiter intentionally geared the above account towards his devotees at that particular time. As Mary pointed out, de Ruiter's way of telling the story of this experience has changed considerably over the years:

> Well, the interesting thing is, what's happened is how events took place back then—now they're defined in completely different terms, completely different terms. For instance, I mean, he refers to his awakening when he was seventeen or something. And you know, for a number of years I've listened to him relate his past and his history. And I kind of screw up inside and think, 'hmm, that's not how I knew it . . . but oh well,' you know . . . he's defining things completely differently now" (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 3).

Mary's recollections of earlier, considerably more Christian-flavored, versions of the story are that:

> He went to apply for a job, and the guy said, 'Ill have to pray about it or ask God,' and John was just flabbergasted, 'cause he sort of always, I mean he was raised in a Catholic church, he had never really heard of anybody, you know, having an intimate relationship with God. Um, I think that just blew him away. It was probably the first time he actually considered such a possibility. . . . And his family says that I think he started going to church—a Baptist church, I would think. And his family did say there was a radical change in John. He became, you know, a soft, kind person, for a year (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 5).

Thus, although in later retellings de Ruiter leaves the Christian aspects of his experiences out of his account, Mary is clear that that the conversion that de Ruiter experienced at seventeen was essentially a Christian one.

Both de Ruiter and Mary recount that after his initial wonderful experience came a time of disillusionment and sorrow. De Ruiter writes:

> That way of being slowly dissipated and after one year, everything vanished as quickly as it had come. I found myself feeling profoundly empty and incomplete. I thought that life could only be meaningless and superficial without the intimacy and nectar of experiencing oneness with the source, reality, Truth, and without the contentment of the nourishing way of being I had come to reside in. . . . At last, through simplicity of heart, through pure and absolute honesty, I just simply let go. I surrendered . . . unconditionally . . . to just simply

> being at the bottom of that well of darkness and never again trying to get out; warmly never again hoping for water. And it was at that moment that I became re-immersed in the benevolent reality of pure being. I became filled with the same absolutely immaculate reality of Truth I had known before, only this time, to the depths that I had inwardly allowed myself to he hollowed out (de Ruiter 1999: xii-xiii).

Mary's account largely echoes de Ruiter's —while once again adding Christian references—saying:

> And then . . . the bliss of new-born Christianity passed and he, you know, this is how the story goes, there was a lot of agony then 'cause he had lost what he had. There was desperation; this is the following year, then year number two, just desperation to have it back. . . . But I think at that point is when, I mean as the story goes, when he completely surrendered and let—completely settled it—'this is okay, I can live with this desperation.' I think that's kind of when his enlightenment happened. When he just completely settled for this darkness (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 5).

Thus, despite the differences between the two accounts regarding the inclusion of Christian references, they both state that there were essentially two stages to the story of de Ruiter's initiation into a self-committed spirituality. First, de Ruiter had an enthralling burst of joyful religious experience. Second, this joy dissipated over a year-long period and led to a depressed, desperate state that de Ruiter reputedly finally learned to accept

unconditionally; to be—in the parlance of the group—"OK not to be OK" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 1).

Regardless of the fact that de Ruiter may have related this experience differently over the years, it remains in his view a watershed moment in his spiritual development, in that it served as the impetus for the spiritual career that he continues to follow to this day. The group also clearly views what happened to de Ruiter at age seventeen as important. Mary explains, "in fact I think the people in the group probably are more fascinated by his past and they've got it memorized" (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 5). Thus, the story of de Ruiter's enlightenment has taken on the quality of legend or lore within the group itself.

After moving to Edmonton, de Ruiter involved himself in Christian Pentecostal circles, and had some experiences that gave him a personal sense of mission regarding his religiosity. Rebecca remembers, "he . . . got connected with People's Church, a, kind of a youth Pentecostal church. . . . He sort of got in . . . a kind of more intimate relationship with the pastor" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 20). Part of his involvement with this church was attending youth rallies. According to Rebecca, one of these rallies was particularly transformative for de Ruiter:

> He had gone to some big youth rally with Candice Stacey [sic] . . . who was a bit of a prophet, and who was doing big rallies with youth and had called John out at some point and said, *'you'* and they called him to the front and they said, *'you will be a mighty man of God'*. . . .

> So, he started having visions of being an important person in the Christian circle, and when he spoke to me he would talk about being that, something like Billy Graham (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 20-21).

Thus, even at this early stage, de Ruiter was envisioning himself as a powerful spiritual leader.

In his late-teens and early-twenties, de Ruiter read Christian books voraciously, and this appetite led him in 1981 to Joyce, who was an eighteen-year-old worker at the Canadian Bible Society bookstore. Connecting them both was a strong passion for Christianity, and after marrying in 1982, they left together to study for a year at the Toronto Baptist Seminary (Legge 1997: D8), and subsequently for a year at the Prairie Bible Institute in Three Hills, Alberta (Legge 1997: D8). Founded in 1922, the Prairie Bible Institute has long been a hotbed for the development of new Christian sectarian movements, with a history of "annually catechizing over a thousand students in old-fashioned Puritanism and evangelism, and dispatching them to spread these doctrines not only into every corner of the prairies but into lands across the sea" (Mann 1955: 4). This school was not formally attached to any particular sect in Alberta, but as W. E. Mann saw, their "graduates entered the ministry of the newer sects, for example the Pentecostal assemblies of Canada and the Alliance" (1955: 82).

The new couple's stints at these institutions were relatively short, however, because they were "put off by the leadership; they both felt it was

too rigid" (Hutchinson 2001: 32) and because John "'thought he'd get more learning on his own and interning with a pastor'" (Joyce de Ruiter quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 32). Next for de Ruiter was a short spell of occasional preaching at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Edmonton. From all accounts, de Ruiter was an atypical intern. Joyce recalls one time when de Ruiter, at home, was:

> 'waiting on God for a sermon. He called the pastor and said, "There's nothing, there's still nothing." On Sunday morning he went up to the pulpit and just said, "There's no word. God has no word for you"'(quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 32).

In the Lutheran Church, the rite of Confirmation involves a public profession on faith. Often, initiates will give an account of their spiritual history as part of this profession. When de Ruiter chose to undergo the rite in 1984, he spoke "for nine hours late into the night into the early morning hours. . . . This is when Bob [Emmerzael] . . . first recognized John as something beyond anybody else and basically gave himself to John" (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 8). Thus, de Ruiter's unconventionality within the context of the Lutheran church led to the attraction of his first devotee, Bob Emmerzael, in 1984.

By 1986, de Ruiter had left the Lutheran congregation, taking five families—including Bob and Hetty Emmerzael—with him. This small schism marks the beginning of de Ruiter's fully independent ministry. Mary remembers this schism:

> it's from that church that he began his actual first group. He broke off from it, it wasn't really discord between him and the pastor. . . . I think it was just something he knew. I can't quite define why he broke off. But he broke from this internship and began his own very very tiny group (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 6).

Working as an orthopedic shoemaker by day, he became a self-styled, small-scale minister to a few families, preaching in homes at night and on weekends.

When one surveys de Ruiter's behavior during this early period, a pattern becomes apparent, in which he would continually seek out spiritual guidance from various sources, only to reject each teacher or tradition in turn. De Ruiter's tastes were eclectic, and though at times others influenced him tremendously, their influence seldom lasted very long. This pattern continued throughout de Ruiter's independent ministerial career. In his book, *Unveiling Reality*, de Ruiter describes how he has "[a]llowed honesty to look at each doctrine, each teacher, and each technique I encountered, only to discover that they were all less than absolutely true" (de Ruiter 1999: xii). At various points, he spent large amounts of time learning from people such as osteopathy practitioner Gideon Seth, and Neale Donald Walsch, who is a quasi-Christian guru and the best-selling author of the *Conversations with God* book series (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 15). His most intense learning relationship, however, was with a local reflexologist and metaphysical teacher named Boots Beaudry (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 15).

Despite his initial commitment to study and learn from these people, de Ruiter always moved on and past his mentors, and at times, his departure would elicit feelings of resentment from those with whom he no longer had any need. Rebecca recalls that de Ruiter's relationship with Boots Beaudry ended in this way:

> I think that . . . she was extremely hurt by John. I mean, John definitely used her. He just took her in for a year, spent, yeah, pretty much every day, maybe five days a week . . . with her. They would always talk about how it was sort of a mutual relationship because . . . she was the master of metaphysics and, or bodywork or whatever and he was the master of the soul. . . . But, I mean, they really learned from each other. And then he just dumped her, um, so she's very bitter about that (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 17).

Anne viewed de Ruiter's dealings with Beaudry in a similar light:

> I guess Boots was like, apparently, the one kind of like teaching John a lot of these kind of "methods" and things like that. And I think at one point she was hurt or something like that because she was kind of put in the forefront or something and then kind of left behind when John kind of learned what he needed to learn from her (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 34).

Beaudry no longer maintains a close relationship with de Ruiter, and despite the reputed pain she experienced at the way de Ruiter left her, she still reveres him. When Jeremy Loome questioned her about de Ruiter's extramarital

relationships, she stood up to his defense, saying, "I don't think its right, some of the stuff that he has done, but that doesn't mean to say it's not true" (Loome 2006a: 38).

A Student No Longer: de Ruiter as Enlightened Teacher

Most recently, de Ruiter has abandoned seeking guidance from other spiritual teachers, choosing instead to present himself as the paramount example of someone who is enlightened, or, to use the language of the group, as a "living embodiment of Truth" (de Ronde 2000: 3-4).[7] The fundamental aim of his followers is to achieve what he already has, by both practicing his ways and by seeking his guidance. When one reporter asked de Ruiter if his adherents worshiped *him*, de Ruiter replied, "'I'm the source of embodiment. What they worship is not the man but *the way of being* in the man'" (quoted in Legge 1997: D8 [emphasis added]).

Thus, John de Ruiter's style of leadership has affinities with Weber's ideal-type of the *exemplary* (as opposed to the *ethical*) prophet, meaning that "by his personal example, [he] demonstrates to others the way to religious salvation. . . . The preaching . . . directs itself to the self-interest of those who crave salvation, recommending to them the same path as he himself has traversed" (Weber 1947: 55). Devotees are attracted to de Ruiter *specifically* –rather than to self-directed study or to other teachers– because they believe that he presents the *best example* of how to live.

[7] A fuller explication of this characterization of de Ruiter is in chapter three under the heading "Stage Three: *The Living Embodiment of Truth*."

This role of devotee, however, seems to be fraught with internal contradictions. Although the ultimate stated goal for devotees is to emulate de Ruiter and achieve his spiritual state, the culture of the group, which fosters both an extremely high view of de Ruiter and a correspondingly extreme humility on the part of devotees, makes unlikely the prospect that the group will ever actually recognize a devotee as having reached the spiritual strata that de Ruiter reputedly inhabits. Thus, in essence, there are two countervailing tendencies regarding devotees' comportments to de Ruiter. On the one hand, members struggle to attain spiritual enlightenment by being *like* de Ruiter, and on the other hand, they see de Ruiter as someone completely *extraordinary* and *unique*. Arthur Schweitzer noted that without the charismatic commitment of devotees, a leader's claims have no external support (1984: 34). The converse is also true: without the leader's extraordinary and exclusivist claims, followers would not be able to have their faith and all the corollary benefits that they claim to derive from it (1984: 34). Thus, despite devotees' wishes to emulate de Ruiter, the charismatic dynamic that underlies their relationships with him is dependent on a clear separation within the group between the roles of enlightened teacher and subservient devotee.

Devotees with prior experience in other charismatic groups were active in modeling these subservient and worshipful roles. Remembers Yvonne:

> I really saw the flavour change, too, when he went to India and then he came back because the people who came back from India were the

> seasoned guru-type people, and they were the ones who were coming back, and they were the ones who were throwing themselves at his feet and kissing his feet (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 14).

Rebecca recalled how a man named Dilbagh Singh (Baba) Bhangoo, an ex-Sikh of Indian origin, also was instrumental in modeling the role of devotee to other followers:

> Baba represented a hundred percent devotion and he was—he's Indian right, so he knew the whole world and liked the protocol of being a disciple. So he sort of *modeled.* He just worshiped John, and sort of modeled that servanthood. . . . And he, he was very intelligent, but he became very weak and meek around John (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 4).

Thus, the role of devotees within the group is to function in part as character *foils* to de Ruiter, enhancing de Ruiter's status through their contrast with, rather than similarity to him.

If devotees begin to think that they are making progress in following the path that de Ruiter has laid out, then de Ruiter's dialogues often will serve the purpose of 'putting them in their place.' Joyce:

> 'remember[s] sitting in those meetings so many times, listening to a questioner, and watching John pick apart their [sic] life, or their identity. . . . Let's say they ran a charitable organization. Perhaps it was very genuine. He would take it apart, so that it was all about them, their own self-esteem and personal agenda. And you would just

see them completely fall apart. That happened repeatedly. He would just completely undo people' (quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 33).

Hutchinson observed that "[t]he people at the microphone all seemed lost. . . . Most mentioned that they weren't making any progress, even after following de Ruiter for years. This, I would learn, is a common refrain" (Hutchinson 2001: 31). Thus, the devotees of de Ruiter seem to inhabit a fundamentally contradictory social position in that, while they have joined a group with the aim of attaining enlightenment, their roles within the group preclude them from them the possibility of this attainment.

The de Ruiter Group: Various Aspects

Culture

We already have recounted that de Ruiter's early spiritual history was Christian in character and that his first devotees came to him through Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Edmonton. Thus, in its earliest incarnations, the culture of the de Ruiter group was very much Christian, although unconventionally so. De Ruiter claimed to experience regular visitations from Christ (Legge 1997: D8; Pedersen 1993: C2), and this direct revelation often served to undermine conventional Christian doctrines as well as the rest of worldwide Christianity generally. De Ruiter expressed this antagonism very poignantly one day by erecting a billboard outside of his workplace that read, "Jesus Christ says Christianity is Satan's Masterpiece" (Pedersen 1993: C2).

As time went on, de Ruiter began to make connections with several influential non-Christians who would eventually have a dramatic impact on the culture of the de Ruiter group. One such individual was the aforementioned Baba, who, through connections of his own, arranged for de Ruiter to hold his meetings at Akashic Books (a New Age bookstore) in 1993 and later at Beaudry's reflexology clinic (Hutchinson 2001: 33). Mary recalled:

> that's when a flock of south side [i.e., the 'trendy' section of Edmonton], New Age, you know, somewhat young, various walks of life, but a lot of young people – that's when they all joined. So, that would have been when it took a big step in growth. Until then it was basically Christian people – you know, stable families. That's when it attracted people from all over the place (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 10).

Further changes to the culture of the group followed John's acceptance of invitations to speak at various places, first in North America, and then around the world. New believers followed him back from New Age circles in Vancouver, Canada; Maui and New York City (USA); Bristol and London (England); and Byron Bay, Australia. In February 1999, de Ruiter traveled to Poona, India, and attracted many followers from the Osho/Rajneesh ashram there.

Thus, while initially the group's constituency was mainly former members of mainline Christian churches, the type of recruits changed after de Ruiter

gradually removed Christian references from his message,[8] and after his targeting of alternative/New Age spiritual markets during his tours. Indeed, as the group grew in size and age, it increasingly drew recruits from what Campbell described as the "cultic milieu;" a cultural underground that "continually giv[es] birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals" (1972: 14). Yvonne and Olivia present two examples of devotees who entered the group through alternative religious channels. Recalls Yvonne:

> I was told by this older couple that he was a powerful man that [sic] was coming from Edmonton and, it was almost like there was a phone tree, like the people that [sic] told me were . . . kind of into New Age healing. So they somehow got a message from someone who was phoning different people who would have been interested in that, and its like 'Hey you know, there's this guy coming, and you might want to check him out' (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 1).

Olivia also learned of de Ruiter through a non-mainline religious source. Her religious involvement, which eventually led to de Ruiter, was:

> kind of um, more pagan style so, it was really open to all sorts of different religions and philosophies. . . . [W]hen I was in [omitted] and was going to University and studying, [I] took a course in philosophy, introductory Buddhism, and got involved with people who were into

[8] A specific example of this removal is de Ruiter's recounting of his religious experiences as a boy of seventeen years old, above. A much more detailed account of the transformation of de Ruiter's roles—from a "Messenger of Christ" to a "Living Embodiment of Truth"—can be found in chapter three.

> Buddhist meditation. I had met some people in [omitted] who were holding meditation groups and actually this one person in particular, his name was Robert [pseudonym], he introduced me to John. [He] became a really good personal friend and um, spiritual counselor and really did help me in many ways (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 14).

Anne remembers that living in a house that devotees of de Ruiter frequented exposed her to an eclectic range of alternative spiritual practices:

> You know, [laugh], there's [sic] pictures of him [de Ruiter] everywhere you know, and there's some guy from Germany doing naked yoga in the backyard and another one from, you know, wherever, is making a sweat lodge on the other side of the yard, and like, there's, like, six people downstairs doing chanting or whatever. It was . . . definitely interesting. . . . Always chanting people in our house, and stuff like that. It was actually really cool (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 11).

During the course of my research, I have come across stories of people who have entered the de Ruiter group through many different spheres of the cultic milieu, including those from the Osho/Rajneesh ashram, members of the Christian group, The Way, and former followers of the Hungarian guru Imre Vallyon.

Today, adherents of de Ruiter's message share a common ideology of seekership despite their disparate backgrounds and cultural heritages, and

thus, generally, they are very tolerant of the views of others. One former member described her experience of de Ruiter's ten-day retreats as:

> exciting. It was nice to have . . . something where people are coming from all over the world to join for one thing and . . . everyone was really loving each other, lots of hugs and kisses. . . . It was just kind of like spreading the message of this Truth and love (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 14).

Despite these differences in places of origin and spirituality, the demographics of the de Ruiter group are fairly homogenous, mostly "white, middle-aged, and affluent" (Hutchinson 2001: 32). Anne also noticed, "there's [sic] not very many men in the group and there were lots of young beautiful women" – an imbalance that she theorized was due to the fact that "a lot of women are really drawn to John" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 28). The general demeanor of followers of de Ruiter reflects his call on them to be "soft." Said another former member, "people in the group were very similar, spoke very softly, very slowly, almost in a very hypnotic state" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 7).

Belief System

Grasping the belief system of de Ruiter and his followers is no easy task, mainly because of the esoteric nature of their doctrinal discussions. Andrew P., a writer for the e-zine *Energy Grid*, experienced this frustration when he attended two meetings, saying:

> [t]he main problem with John's lectures is the limit of semantics. Describing 'things' that to most of us are abstract to the extreme – such as 'okayness,' 'truth,' 'honesty,' 'it,' 'real,' and 'reality,' – will always present an insurmountable problem. These terms were used by John without any explanation, and when some of the questioners did challenge them, his definitions were tautological, involving further nebulous abstractions. So, "truth" became that part of us that is "real", and "reality" became that part within us that is "true" (e-text, no page numbers).

The long silences that punctuate the discussions between de Ruiter and his followers also contribute to perceptions that the meetings are doctrinally vacuous. Follower Carol Askew said, "'[t]here wasn't [sic] really any teachings. It was just going and sitting and being with John for hours and hours with mostly silence'" (quoted in Piercey 2001).

These caveats aside, some core religious ideas do guide de Ruiter and his followers' thinking — ideas that appear regularly at group meetings[9] and in the group's publications. De Ruiter maintains that most people are disconnected from true reality, in an out-of-touch state that has its genesis in an incorrect identification with the "*outermost* 'vehicles of expression'" of the "mind, body, emotions, intuition, and will" (Oasis 2003a: 3). This

[9] I make this assertion after having viewed over eight hours of video-taped meetings and after listening to over twenty hours of audio-taped meetings that Oasis Edmonton Inc. has produced for sale. De Ruiter's book, *Unveiling Reality*, is also informative in this respect, as it consists of several transcriptions of meetings organized into chapters. Finally, the former members whom I interviewed found it easy to recount central tenets of the group's theology that they had learned while in attendance at de Ruiter group meetings.

identification, which prevents people from accessing Truth, is a manifestation of our wish to hold on to things, people, and perceptions of ourselves that are dear to us. Thus, de Ruiter prescribes for his followers "a release from the bondage of self-generated mental and emotional illusion into an original, authenticity of being" – something that "will cost you your entire self-created existence" (Oasis 2003a: 1-2). In conversations with several former members, I noted that all of them mentioned de Ruiter's encouragement that they were to be "soft" and "open," and that rather than worrying, they were to accept things "as is."[10]

When someone struggles with, or resists this "releasing" process, de Ruiter and the group regard this person as having an "issue" and believe that such a person needs to go through a "death," – letting go of everything until all that is left is "that tiny little bit," or "that one percent" that is not an illusion, but completely real (de Ruiter 1999: 154-155). De Ruiter claims to have gone through many of these deaths himself, to the point where he lives "absolutely and unconditionally surrendered to ever deepening depths of 'home,' surrendered to innermost consciousness, reality, Truth" (de Ruiter 1999: 103). De Ruiter explained some of his main theological concepts, such as "going home," "surrender," and "the tiny pull," at a group meeting in Hawaii:

> ""Going home" is just simply responding to any moment where there is a newness of an opportunity in which there is a tiny, tiny little pull

[10] The name of de Ruiter's corporation, Oasis Edmonton Inc., intentionally contains this catch phrase (ie. O *as is*).

> to just let it go, to just surrender to what you know is true, regardless of how little that is. [long pause] But to *completely* surrender to it, for good, then in that moment, you're "home."'
>
> Questioner: 'You said surrender to the tiniest pull?'
>
> de Ruiter: 'The tiniest pull that invites you to surrender, to give into it, and that you never pull back out of that again, no matter how it hurts you, what it costs you, how that may undo your existence, regardless of how that may change your life, that you'll never draw back out of surrender to reality, that you'll let yourself stay in that way of being no matter what it costs you. Then that's *staying* home' (de Ruiter and questioner quoted in Oasis 1998).

Essentially then, de Ruiter invites his devotees to abandon listening to thoughts and emotions in favor of listening to a drive that is reputedly more fundamental and "real." He calls this more fundamental listening "knowing."

Not surprisingly, at times devotees have had difficulty putting de Ruiter's theological directives into practice. Anne reflected:

> I remember I was very depressed at times 'cause I was kind of like, you were like striving for this like, this *knowing* and this *truth* and stuff, but at the same time, when you looked at it, when you got there it almost seemed like a state of comatose or something because . . . you're not allowed to trust your feelings, your wants, and your needs and your beliefs to tell you what's true. Its just some kind of *knowing* . . . and then people get like, 'that's crazy – you're not supposed to

> trust your thoughts or your feelings to tell you what's true – you know, what do you listen to?' Well, its a *knowing*, you know. . . . I mean, now thinking about it, it is kind of crazy, but I mean, I don't know—who really knows right? (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 3).

Elsewhere, Anne expressed similar sentiments:

> lots of it was all just kind of like, 'don't listen to your thoughts and feelings to tell you what's true,' but then it's like, okay, someone says 'I have a "knowing,"' [but] what's the difference between a 'knowing,' and a 'thought,' or a 'belief?' You know, and it's like, 'well . . . it's a *knowing* and it's in your core'. . . . I used to laugh at a lot of it and believe a lot of it too and defend a lot of it, so I don't know, it was always a conflict, an internal conflict of mine. Even now, even though I don't go to John meetings and I don't have a desire to, I still wouldn't condemn it and I wouldn't um, say that I didn't get anything from it (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 31-32).

Thus, the language and concepts that de Ruiter would work with at meetings at times seemed both profound and nonsensical to Anne.

In order to illustrate how these beliefs play out concretely in the context of the group, I will present one example. By 1999, de Ruiter had been spending increasing amounts of time with two of his young female devotees—sisters Benita and Katrina Von Sass. Often John went to Benita's house until very late in the evening and Katrina had moved into the basement of the de Ruiter home, where John would stay up with her late into the night, watching movies

and talking (Hutchinson 2001: 34). According to Hutchinson, "Joyce sometimes begged [John] to come to bed, but says she was always rebuked" (2001: 34). Understandably, Joyce de Ruiter had her suspicions about these relationships, and her suspicions proved warranted when one day John suggested to her that, "my ultimate [metaphorical] death would be if he took on two more wives" (Joyce de Ruiter quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 35).

De Ruiter's explanation of these events to the group in late 1999 was theologically loaded. To his devotees and to his wife, John justified this development by conceptualizing it as an important event in his spiritual development, saying that when he made the decision to:

> Look outside the relationship with Joyce . . . I knew I would do what I know was true, regardless of what it would cost me and regardless of what it would cost others. . . . From that time onward . . . any woman that [sic] I would meet, I would just let myself be wide open and that's without any kind of movement forward, that's without any wanting, that's without desire, that's without need, it's just, the heart simply opening itself up (Oasis 1999c)

In de Ruiter's explanation, this was a "death" for him as well as for Joyce. He described how:

> I knew that I would give in to what I know, even though it would do something that, in a, for all appearances, I would no longer be beyond reproach. . . . So when that opened up, I [knew] that I would go there and that it would look a certain way, but here it's *not* that way. I'm

> surrendering to what I know, regardless of what it looks like, regardless of how that assaults all of my patterns, all of my patterns of what a relationship is, what a relationship is confined to, and for all of those patterns it was ultimately devastating. But I would never hesitate in responding to what I knew, regardless of what kind of death that would introduce, what kind of dying would happen, what kind of letting-go there would be with anything to do with my life of what I would want (Oasis 1999c).

Thus, Joyce's struggle with this new development, and her ultimate refusal to accept it, was—within the context of de Ruiter and the group's belief system at least—an "issue" that threatened to stultify both her and John's spiritual development. In de Ruiter's words "[w]hat she had to lose was her husband, and that's what she didn't want to lose" (Oasis 1999c).

The above example illustrates that the belief system of the de Ruiter group is so encapsulating and powerful that it is able to supplant obvious interpretations of events with highly unusual ones. For example, though de Ruiter admits to living and sleeping with two women additional to his wife, he denies that these actions constitute either adultery or polygamy. At the time, de Ruiter maintained that his "was a heart that would never move into infidelity, it would never move into unfaithfulness" and explained that, while Joyce's:

> experience was that I no longer loved her . . . that I no longer cared for her because I wasn't showing it in the way that I used to . . . tenderness

was still there, the same tenderness that was always there (Oasis 1999c).

He maintained that, "I'm not polygamous . . . neither do I endorse it . . . all there is is truth" (Oasis 1999c). In addition, de Ruiter stressed several times that his relationships with Benita and Katrina—who one journalist described as "his two most attractive apostles" (Hutchinson 2001: 32)—"didn't have to do with their looks, their appearance, there heart, their age. It didn't have anything to do with any kind of compatibility, it had only to do with what arose from within my innermost, and my response to that" (Oasis 1999c).

Mary explained how, through the lens of de Ruiter's 'theology of knowing,' many in the group have come to revere John's dual extramarital relationships: "for the most part, the group has just fallen more in love with him. . . . He is willing to do something that looks so bad and will be so misunderstood, but he'll do it anyways" (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 25). De Ruiter's controversial relationships are thus taken as a sign of his complete commitment to his way of life. Member Baba explained:

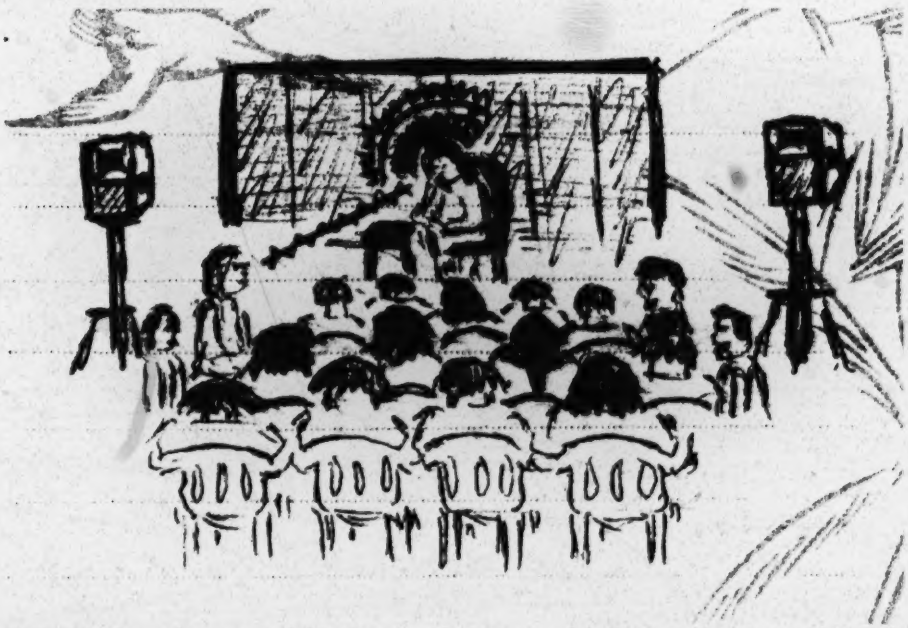
> 'Most of us are not qualified to have even one [spouse]. We're not qualified to be married. We're not qualified to be in relationships. We are not, we're just not qualified to be in that. But somebody who *is* qualified actually can be a husband, a worthy husband not just to one, but to many' (quoted in Piercey 2001).

Olivia recounted a situation when de Ruiter was challenged. The response was striking. The woman:

said, 'you know, I only come here because I have a lot of friends in this group . . . I don't believe in it anymore [after] what you did to Joyce,' and [she] started to bring a lot of things up and had a tantrum. And one of the members started crying and ran up to John and started kissing his feet (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 16).

Thus, in the eyes of many devotees, de Ruiter is a teacher who lives by his teachings uncompromisingly, and his multiple sexual partnerships are merely a sign that he is more "qualified" than most. What is more, some devotees view challenges to de Ruiter as unjust attacks, and will rush to protect him in these situations.

Worship Site and Form of Worship



A teenaged member created this drawing during one of de Ruiter's meetings. Notice the aura that surrounds de Ruiter and the intense stare that is occurring between de Ruiter and one attendee.

For years, the de Ruiter group worshiped in rented facilities. Recently, however, de Ruiter opened his double-storied new complex, the "Edmonton College of Integrated Philosophy,"[11] which, as is advertised on <www.oasisedmontonconferencecentre.com>, is situated on 3.7 acres of land in the west end of Edmonton. The state-of-the-art facility, which can accommodate gatherings of up to 630 people, is equipped with audio and video recording facilities, and an audio/video projection system that projects live images of de Ruiter's face onto two ten-foot screens. De Ruiter now holds four meetings per week at this site for most of the year when he is not on tour. When on tour, the de Ruiter group gathers in places such as the Palais Auersperg in Vienna; the Royal National Hotel and the Grand Hall of the Battersea Arts Centre in London; and the SBW Independent Theatre in Sydney, Australia (Oasis 2003a: 6).

The meeting style of the de Ruiter group takes the form of a *satsang*: a gathering of devotees around a guru, at which participants listen to, talk about, and try to assimilate Truth. Meetings are essentially three-hour long question-and-answer periods, punctuated by long periods of silence and gazing between de Ruiter and his followers. De Ruiter, who is the only recipient of questions, sits up on a platform and speaks through a headset while devotees sit around him in chairs. A special row of chairs marks the place from which one can ask de Ruiter questions through a microphone. To get to the questioner's chair, one needs to sign-up on a list that volunteers keep at the back of the

[11] For pictures of the new centre, see <http://www.johnderuiter.com/ConstructionUpdates2.pdf>.

hall. When one's turn has come, devotees leave their seats, making their way to the questioner's chair. Mary described de Ruiter's dialogical style of teaching:

> [E]very teaching comes out of a question; the question is a springboard always. . . . [W]ith questions, he could do one of three things basically. He could just gaze, which is a very common thing with the meetings, and not answer. And the person either feels like they [sic] don't need an answer or he answered them in an internal way. . . . [O]r he could give a short answer, sometimes there was a bit of dialoging back and forth . . . and occasionally, maybe once a weekend, twice a weekend . . . the question will be a springboard for a long teaching (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 14).

Before the meetings begin, de Ruiter's adherents talk amongst themselves. As he enters, however, there is a very distinct hush, and the reverent silence of the meeting begins. In order to preserve this silence, Oasis asks attendees to "ensure that noisy or chatty babies are quickly taken from the Conference Hall as a courtesy to others" (Oasis 2004a: 1). There have been times when a whole three-hour session passes in which de Ruiter does not speak (McKeen 2003: B1).

Revenue

Weber predicted that, aside from providing the social support that legitimates a charismatic leader's authority, followers "to whom the charisma is addressed [would] provide honorific gifts, donations or other voluntary

contributions" in order to support their leader (Weber 1958: 247). Accordingly, de Ruiter gains resources from his adherents in several ways.

Indications are that some members pay tithes to de Ruiter. For example, journalist Brian Hutchinson (2001: 35) tells of Susan Scott (pseudonym) who, with her husband, gave $300.00[12] to de Ruiter monthly. Although difficult to verify, indications are that members at least have considered giving substantial one-time donations to de Ruiter. Rebecca remembers one instance where:

> before John actually became a guru, so one of the early people—so this was still somewhat within a Christian context—there was a huge discussion at some point where somebody was . . . in extreme struggles with whether or not he should give his house to John.
>
> Interviewer: Oh?
>
> M: And his car . . . And that was based on . . . —you know, I have to say, I was an observer—but um, it was based on that he was too attached to them. . . . And so, the dilemma with this person was—'Did he *know* to do this or not? Did he actually *know* to give John his house and the car?' Neither one actually happened. But . . . I don't think John actually ever said, 'You know to do it,' but it was a long discussion. I'm sure John never actually said, '*you know to do this*' (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 13).

Members volunteer to perform the many duties associated with the running of de Ruiter's corporation, Oasis Edmonton Inc. These duties include those that

[12] All value amounts are in Canadian dollars.

are necessary for holding meetings (such as operating recording equipment, cleaning the entranceways, etc.) as well as skills and services outside of meeting sessions (such as installing hardware, building maintenance, shuttling attendees from out of town etc. [Oasis 2003b:1-2]). The amount and types of labour that volunteers perform for the group is considerable,[13] and the group's volunteer form requests that potential volunteers to check off their availability, from "1-5 hours" per week, to "more than 20 hours" per week (Oasis 2003b: 2). De Ruiter's former wife, Joyce, recalled in a CBC interview, "'[p]eople would offer to clean my house, do my yard work. I could have had my kids driven anywhere if I wanted'" (quoted in Piercey 2001).

Aside from this voluntarism, de Ruiter gains funds from his devotees in several ways. There is an entrance fee for meetings and retreats. The fee is $5.00 at Edmonton meetings, but can be much higher in other cities. CBC reporter Judy Piercey noted that in Hamburg, the admission fee was the equivalent of $16.00, and she estimated that de Ruiter "would walk away from the five days in Hamburg with $40,000 in admission alone." The fee was similar for one of his tour stops in Amsterdam, where 300 people attended his sessions twice a day for three days (Hutchinson 2001: 31). The group's retreats differ little from regular meetings in form or content, but are

[13] The group's volunteer application form has sixty-two categories of skills that it asks its members to provide outside of regular meeting session duties. These services include budgeting, merchandizing, cashier duties, inventory management, letter writing, photography, typing, photocopying, electrical work, carpentry, welding, masonry, plumbing, babysitting, cooking, housekeeping, driving/shuttle, and 'odd jobs' among other things (Oasis 2003b: 1-2). The form also asks volunteers to provide access to business equipment, hand/power tools, "major equipment/tools," and vehicles (Oasis 2003b: 2).

considerably more expensive, at $760.00 for the non-'early-bird' rate for ten-days (Oasis 2004a: 1). Attendees also provide finances to the group by purchasing from a large line of merchandise at meetings. De Ruiter's book, *Unveiling Reality*, audiotaped meetings (162 of which are offered on an order form from 2002 [Oasis 2002: 2]), videotapes, DVDs and "flattering portraits of himself" are available for purchase (Hutchinson 2001: 32).

Given that de Ruiter is the sole director and share holder of Oasis Edmonton Inc., information about the specific success of these revenue-generating strategies is not available to the public. Even the most conservative estimates, however, make it clear that fundraising strategies associated with attendance alone generate a considerable amount of revenue for de Ruiter. According to Hutchinson, in 2001 the group consisted of roughly 250 fulltime devotees who attend his meetings four times per week, in addition to many more who only attend occasionally or who reside in other countries and attend de Ruiter's speaking tour dates (2001: 32). Although de Ruiter worked as an orthopedic shoemaker early on in his career as a guru, he no longer holds a day job, and thus stands, as Weber predicted ideal-typical charismatic leaders would, "outside the ties of this world, outside of routine occupations" (Weber 1958: 248).

Recruitment

Although the de Ruiter group does not have any formal proselytizing programs, word-of-mouth advertising is quite effective, since many in the group are former members of other new religious movements, and can use old

social networks for recruitment purposes. The Internet is a powerful advertising tool for the de Ruiter group as well. Several websites that devote space to spiritual masters feature de Ruiter, linking to his own elaborate website, <www.johnderuiter.com>. Here, one can find links to his touring schedule as well as schedules for his retreats. As mentioned above (p. 4) de Ruiter's speaking tours are very successful in that many people have followed him back to Edmonton from all over the world in order to live near him, thus constituting the main way in which the de Ruiter group recruits new adherents. The primary aim of the de Ruiter group's recruitment strategy, then, is to get potential recruits to attend worship services, providing opportunities for de Ruiter to form charismatic connections with attendees. Atendee Amanda T. recalled being told by a greeter/money collector at the door of the College:

> 'If this is your first time here, we usually recommend you attend at least four times. For some people, they feel a connection with John after just one visit, but for others, it seems like nothing until they've come back about three or four visits' (quoted in T. 2006: 10).

Thus, the charismatic connections that de Ruiter forms with attendees may take some time to develop—often over the course of more than one meeting.

Although many who attend de Ruiter's meetings out of curiosity subsequently feel a desire to move to Edmonton and attend regularly, often they also harbour strong reservations at this prospect. Aside from the fact that membership is a time-consuming and financially costly affair, the greatest

reservations often stem from the costs that such a commitment would exact on their other significant relationships. It is common for attendees who are considering becoming more committed, and family members of these semi-committed people, to confront de Ruiter with these struggles. In 1999, Marilyn Lunge of Calgary was considering a move to Edmonton to be with the group, much to the dismay of her husband, Bob Lunge, and father, Allan Stodalka, both of whom confronted de Ruiter at a Calgary meeting. Journalist Frank King wrote:

> De Ruiter said he wouldn't tell Marilyn whether or not to pull up stakes and join his movement. Instead, his advice was 'to clean the whole table in terms of Calgary or Edmonton, her family, herself and me, so there's no personal preference involved. Then look inside and see what comes up. Whatever Marilyn honestly knows is true, she should follow that' (quoted in King 1999: A4).

Hutchinson quotes one woman at an Amsterdam meeting who exclaimed, "I've left everything, I don't really know where to go next. I'm free-flying, but I'm scared. I'm wondering whether you think it would be a good idea to spend a bit more time with you, in Canada?" De Ruiter's response was similar in this case:

> Either there is a very gentle, clear pull to come and be with me, or there is not. . . . If you cannot honestly know, then do what feels good. . . . When you no longer consult with your mind, when you consult only with what you are, in everything you are doing, then you've

> found the source of life within, which frees us from always having to get something from this life (quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 33).

Thus, although de Ruiter will not directly tell his followers what to do in these circumstances, he directs devotees to organize their thoughts so as to ignore all 'preferences' (which include concerns for family members and place of living) and to look for a "gentle, clear pull" to be with him. Essentially, devotees are to ignore the *dissuading* factors in their decision-making process about whether to move. So, although one could not accuse de Ruiter of telling people what to do outright, there is no doubt that his advice to people contemplating a move—while it appears non-partisan—is actually at times quite leading and suggestive of a particular course of action.

Conclusion

Commenting on the de Ruiter group in 2001, Stephen Kent noted that, as a result of spending "'more and more time with itself and less and less time with contact with the outside world,'" it has set up "'its own morality, its own social system, its own hierarchy, its own status, its own sense of meaning and value'" (quoted in Piercey 2001). This chapter has sought to outline some of these components of the de Ruiter group, as well as to give a description of de Ruiter's early spiritual development that eventually led to the group's founding. The next chapter will focus on the different representations of de Ruiter that have existed throughout his ministerial career, and the politics that are involved in the interplay of these varying representations.

Chapter Three: Competing Representations of John de Ruiter and the Politics of Extraordinary Claims

Introduction: The Difficulty of Presenting the Charismatic Self in Everyday Life

When Jesus declared, "[o]nly in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor," (Mt. 13:57) he was protesting the poor treatment he experienced upon bringing his ministry to his hometown of Nazareth. He was also commenting more generally, however, on a challenge faced by all charismatic leaders—namely, the difficulty of maintaining the plausibility of an extraordinary or divine status while in the company of those who have an intimate knowledge of one's history, and—to use Goffman's terms—one's "backstage" regions (1959: 112-113). Indeed, perhaps a reason why many sages and gurus travel is that—while it is a tricky business convincing a *stranger* of one's divinity—it is all the more difficult to convince a *friend* thus. The typical challenge, "[i]sn't this the carpenter's son?" (Mt. 13: 55), has been hurled at charismatic leaders throughout history. Reporter Jeannie Marshall provided a current example when she titled her *National Post* article about John de Ruiter in a way that pointed to his mundane origins. Indeed, it is a bizarre, impossible idea: *"Shoemaker to Messiah?"* (Marshall 1998: D1 italics added).

The focus of this chapter is an examination of the different representations of de Ruiter that have been generated over the many years of his ministry.

The discourses found in public spheres, in the media, amongst his devotees, his critics, and his more intimate associates, have contributed to this variety of representations, and thus are the subject of analysis. I take direction from Kent's (1990) work on normative strategies and deviance labeling that groups use in their efforts to gain societal legitimacy, as well as Goffman's work on 'the presentation of the self' by people and groups trying to cultivate favorable images.

First, I outline the representation held primarily by de Ruiter's devotees—that of 'de Ruiter the divinity.' I find that this representation is foundational to the charismatic relationships within the group, and I trace the evolution of this divine representation by presenting it in three successive stages as they occurred over time: a) de Ruiter as the *messenger of Christ*, b) the *Christ figure*, and c) the post-Christian image—the *Living Embodiment of Truth*. Second, I outline a representation of de Ruiter, most common among his critics, which sees him as either psychologically or morally deviant, and explain how these representations function as wholly alternative explanations for what devotees perceive as de Ruiter's divine behavior. Next, I examine a third representation of de Ruiter that sees him as merely an 'ordinary guy.' This representation is primarily the result of 'backstage slippages' on the part of de Ruiter. Fourth, I illustrate an image of 'de Ruiter the philosopher'—a character that de Ruiter himself presents to wider society through advertisements on the Internet, in brochures, and on posters. Finally, I use dramaturgical analysis to look at some impression management strategies de

Ruiter employs during group meetings. These strategies are concerned with negotiating among the four representations listed above, and have thus far been successful in the maintaining the plausibility amongst his followers of his divine persona/representation.

John the Divinity: a Three-Stage Evolution

Stage One: *A Messenger of Christ*

Frequently appearing in the histories of religious movements are charismatic leaders who base their authority on claims of a special inheritance from, or relationship to, the supernatural beings of preceding religious traditions (Kent 2003). Paul of Tarsus (then called Saul), a charismatic leader in the early Christian movement, claims that his ministry began with a revelatory vision of Jesus that he experienced during a trip to Damascus (Acts 9:3-7). The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, claimed to have had several visions of the angel Moroni, who advised him that he had special work to do in preparation for the return of Christ (Bushman 1984: 62). Elizabeth Claire Prophet, leader of the Church Universal and Triumphant, claimed that—on account of her good standing in terms of karmic balancing—she had attained an intermediary position vis-à-vis the "Ascended Masters"—a group that included Saint Germain, El Morya, Jesus, and Gautama Buddha (Whitsel 2003: 35). Finally, Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles, the leaders of Heaven's Gate, believed that they were "not humans but beings from what they called the 'evolutionary level above human' (the Next Level)" (Lalich

2004: 48). Though at first this idea seems utterly non-traditional, even here the message was grounded in Christian ideas, for Nettles and Applewhite claimed that they would be killed and raised from the dead in three and a half days (by a UFO) and that, "they were bearing the same information brought by Jesus two thousand years ago" (Lalich 2004: 48-49; see also Raine 2005: 105-106).

In all of these cases it is the special—and often *exclusive*—nature of the relationship between the religiously charismatic leader and the supernatural being that serves as the basis for the leader's 'special' i.e., charismatic, authority. In the belief systems of these movements, the leader is the source of the devotees' communion with the divine, a conduit that, for the devotee, is necessary for religious experience.

In the early days of his independent ministry, John de Ruiter's charisma stemmed from such a claim. For those who believed in him, de Ruiter's relationship with Christ was extraordinary. De Ruiter claimed to see Christ, to talk to him, and, most importantly, know Christ's wishes. To evangelical Christians who struggle to cultivate a relationship with Jesus as their "personal lord and savior," de Ruiter's claims would seem tantalizing, but probably also blasphemous. Mary relayed memories of de Ruiter's use of Christ's authority:

> He would begin to know Christ's heart towards people. . . . He would begin to say 'Christ has a smile inside for you'. . . . So it was as if he was in touch with Christ face-to-face. And I think he would probably

> say that he kind of sees Christ all of the time. That it's before him and he would say [that] to him it was as clear as you and I seeing each other. . . . Yeah, different responses of Christ, that's the word, he would know Christ's responses for people (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 9).

Thus, de Ruiter had developed what I will call here the first stage of his relationship to divinity: that of the *messenger of Christ*.

Early on, de Ruiter's following was quite small, consisting of several families who would meet in homes. In 1993, however, de Ruiter chose to address one of Christ's messages to a wider-than-usual audience, erecting a billboard outside of his workplace that read, "JESUS CHIRST SAYS CHRISTIANITY IS SATAN'S MASTERPIECE." In an article about the billboard printed in *the Edmonton Journal*, de Ruiter explained to reporter Rick Pederson his reasoning for erecting the sign: "'[t]he initiative came from Jesus Christ. . . . [i]t is not my own personal agenda. It is Christ's'" (quoted in Pedersen 1993: C2). Newspaper readers across the city also learned of de Ruiter's unconventional claim that, "'[w]hen I spend time with Christ I can see him. . . . I can see his face—his whole person'" (quoted in Pederson 1993: C2). Finally, de Ruiter gave an exclusive air to his reputed relationship with Christ with his claim that most members of mainline Christianity, "'only encounter an imaginary Christ which is accepted by faith,'" which is in fact the result of the workings of "'demonic spirits'" (quoted in Pedersen 1993: C2).

Thus, by 1993 de Ruiter already had adopted a leadership role that would place him far outside the auspices of mainline Christianity. Though not yet a Christ figure in the eyes of group members, de Ruiter was nonetheless an intercessor to Christ for his followers, and by believing in de Ruiter's special and direct access to Christ, they accorded him the authority to speak to them as Christ would.

Stage Two: *A Christ Figure*

Mary remembers de Ruiter's first tentative steps away from this messenger status and towards a persona that more closely *identified* with Christ. The first stage in this move seemed to be for de Ruiter to claim an *equivalency* between his and Christ's missions. Recalls Mary:

> [t]here was kind of a transition from Christ teaching him to him becoming that himself. . . . He's evasive about it. He isn't Jesus Christ, but becoming 'the one' or 'the representative.' He has different ways of defining that. Um, it would be like carrying Christ's mantle, is the best way that I can understand it (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 4).

She also recounted an instant when de Ruiter proclaimed Isaiah 53,[14] a chapter from the Old Testament which Christians traditionally interpret as

---

[14] Isaiah 53 reads, "[1]Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? [2]He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. [3]He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. [4]Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. [5]But he was pierced for our transgressions, he

prophesying the coming of Christ, as referring to him (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 8).

After de Ruiter's introduction to the New Age circles in Maui and Vancouver, as well as to new members from Poona, India, perceptions of de Ruiter's relationship to Christ would bring about an even closer identification. As the representation of de Ruiter as a Christ figure became more accepted, the attendant practices of de Ruiter's devotees became more worshipful. Rebecca explains:

> it wasn't until he met the New Age people that they turned him into a guru and started talking about him being a Christ figure, um, started, you know, worshipping him, kissing his feet, kissing his hands, doing the nāmaste hand-thing[15] to him . . . I think he wasn't quite sure what to do with this, um, I think those were the critical times where he had

---

was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. [6]We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. [7]He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. [8]By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. [9]He was assigned a grave with the wicked, with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. [10]Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. [11]After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. [12]Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (The New International Version Study Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985 pp. 1094-1096).

[15] The "nāmaste hand-thing" to which Mary refers probably is the traditional Indian greeting in which one places the palms of one's hands together in front of the chest, fingers pointing up, as one bows or dips one's head and says "nāmaste" [Hindi for "salutation to you"].

> the choice to say, '*wait, no, don't do this*,' I think those were the times where he had the choice to stay human and stay one of them, but where he allowed himself to become a Christ or god beyond them. And that happened within probably half a year where they turned him into a messiah and he allowed it to happen (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 22-23).

As Rebecca notes, the impetus for the identification of de Ruiter as a Christ figure seems to have been at least as much his followers' desire that this identification take place as his own.

Typical of this process is Olivia's remembrances of a meeting, where she:

> actually sat and talked to him and when I sat and talked with him, ah, the most amazing thing happened, um, it felt like I saw bright lights and then behind him it looked like, um, sort of like a foggy cross (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 2).

She later explained how, because of her Roman Catholic upbringing, this vision was particularly meaningful to her and her partner at the time:

> James [pseudonym] and I connected because we both thought it had something to do with Jesus and because of the fact that I was brought up Roman Catholic. To me, its going back to my childhood and I have very fond memories of the little baby Jesus, and Jesus was love, and all of these associations so that when I saw the cross, I thought 'wow!', you know, 'there's gotta be something to do with Jesus with this man' (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c:10).

Remembering her feelings during the early stages of her involvement with de Ruiter, Yvonne also made comparisons between de Ruiter and Jesus:

> It just seemed there was this aura around him being there and a kind of excitement and also—because he was coming to Calgary every three weeks—he kind of had his little group of Edmonton people who were traveling with him, so it was almost like Jesus and his disciples, right? Like he'd go somewhere and they'd come (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 1).

Her attraction to de Ruiter, which in the first stages was merely a curiosity, was thus directly related to comparisons she was making between the ministries of de Ruiter and Jesus.

Anne also remembers frequent comparisons that de Ruiter would make between himself and Jesus: "John, I guess used to always say that if someone wanted to kill him that he wouldn't defend himself, right, like that's where Jesus would have—what the Jews did right?" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 11-12). Spiritual teacher, Dave Oshana, claims to be one of the discussers with de Ruiter in the dialogues that make up de Ruiter's book, *Unveiling Reality*. He confirms the theme of martyrdom and de Ruiter, writing on <the oshana.org> webpage about a student of his who claims that, "John expected to be assassinated by born-again Christians" (Oshana: no date or page numbers), which is a scenario easily interpreted as being analogous to the persecution of Jesus by the religious establishment of his day.

Finally, Dr. Carl Mindell, a psychiatrist from New York who came to Edmonton to live near de Ruiter, explained to a reporter that he overcame his uneasiness with de Ruiter's adultery by recognizing that de Ruiter actually is following what he saw as a precedent set by the founders of Christianity and Buddhism—both of which are now accorded legitimacy by our society. McKeen writes of Mindell's views, "Jesus Christ, he says, sometimes put his spiritual responsibilities ahead of his family; Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, left his wife and child to pursue enlightenment" (McKeen 2000: E8). Thus, in this second stage of the development of the representation of de Ruiter's divinity, his status and extraordinariness had risen from that of a messenger with exclusive access to Christ, to one who is himself a Christ-like figure.

Stage Three: *A Living Embodiment of Truth*

Though many of his followers were eager to proclaim de Ruiter as a Christ figure for the current age, de Ruiter himself soon developed an attitude of ambivalence towards these comparisons. Perhaps he sensed that characterizing himself in this way might not be the best strategy for recruiting from the non-traditional population of the "cultic milieu" (Campbell 1972). Also possible is that he realized that such comparisons might be offensive or seem ridiculous in wider society. In 1999, Calgarian Bob Lunge, a man who was distraught because his wife, Marilyn, was considering moving to be with the group in Edmonton, confronted de Ruiter at a Calgary meeting. After explaining the basis for his wife's attraction to de Ruiter, namely that, "she

knows you're the embodiment of Christ or truth" de Ruiter replied "I'd say yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything" (quoted in King 1999: A1). In 2000, de Ruiter explained to reporter Scott McKeen why he no longer talks about Jesus or the Bible, saying, "'I shy away from speaking about it because it's too big a thing,' he says 'its too loaded'" (quoted in McKeen 2000: E8).

Currently, the characterization of de Ruiter as a Christ figure has indeed been replaced, for the most part, with the much harder to define, 'living embodiment of truth' (de Ronde 2000:1) representation that is prevalent today. Rather than relying on the language of Christianity, this new characterization employs de Ruiter's own lexicon of highly interpretable terms such as "surrender," "that tiny little bit," "honesty," and "Truth," as well as his esoteric dialectical style that has both confounded and intrigued many of his followers. Also during this time, de Ruiter's speech has become much slower and sparse—so much so that the current process of ascribing divinity to de Ruiter is best described not in terms of the *content* of the dialogue between de Ruiter and his followers, but rather in the *ways*[16] in which devotees and de Ruiter comport themselves towards each other during group meetings.

It is clear that, within the context of the group, there were escalatory dynamics at work in terms of perceptions of de Ruiter's level of divinity. Any praise for de Ruiter seemed to enter a positive-feedback loop. Because de

[16] An exploration of how some of the nonverbal interactions between de Ruiter and his followers sustains and increases his charisma will be the subject of the next chapter.

Ruiter rewarded devotion,[17] and because devotees saw praise of de Ruiter as a sign of devotion, they tended to engage in ever-increasingly extreme expressions of love and praise for him.

The intensity of this process increased through the competitive way in which devotees strived for de Ruiter's attention,[18] fostering 'one-upmanship' in how they spoke about their leader. In addition, the way that devotees shared their de Ruiter-related experiences with each other *after* group meetings also were conducive to an escalatory track for de Ruiter's divinity status. Yvonne recalled the excitement of having her first truly spiritual experience at a group retreat:

> I guess it would almost be like a drug, you know when you slip into it, its amazing, and then it gives you something to talk to your friends about later. I mean, all of a sudden everybody has these interesting experiences, and I think that as a group we'd just feed off of each other—like, you can't wait to hear the next story. Like, I mean, there's so many stories that would go on about that and the excitement and the frenzy (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 4-5).

---

[17] Rebecca remembered that, for his devotees, "having John stare at you is definitely a reward, and having him not, even make eye contact with you, is definitely punitive" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 25).

[18] Yvonne remembers, "People would just flock, it was how you'd picture how it was in the days of Jesus. People would just mull around him and sometimes at the parties, like one girl, or, I can think of a couple of times when one or two girls might get hold of him and just yak his ear off and he would just do that, he might stay with one person for hours at a time talking, and then everyone around him is like, they're going through all of this agony because they want [to be around him] and it's a funny thing because the whole thing was about not being attached and not wanting, but everybody wanted John, everybody wanted to touch him, to be by him," (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 13).

Thus, devotees received social rewards for telling amazing stories about their experiences with de Ruiter, and these amazing stories seemed to 'set the bar' for future accounts.

The result of these escalatory processes meant an ever-increasing amazement among de Ruiter's followers at his reputed powers and sublimity. Benita Von Sass's language provides an example of the way in which some of his followers perceive de Ruiter, "'[w]hat I know is that John is absolute purity of heart. I know John is goodness and purity personified. I'm in love with love'" (quoted in McKeen 2000: E7). Erica Hunter told CBC reporter Judy Piercey that, "'John came and his words touched me in a way that I never [have] been touched before'" (quoted in Piercey 2001). Reflective of the extreme nature of these statements are de Ruiter's own. On the back of his book, *Unveiling Reality*, is the claim that de Ruiter's "gift is not limited to the rational content of his words, but resides within the living essence of Truth emanating through him" (de Ruiter 1999: back cover). At an Edmonton meeting, one attendee exclaimed:

> I can't believe this is happening. I've never trusted anybody in my life. I haven't trusted the world. I haven't trusted myself and I have total trust in you. Total trust. I can't believe that I can go 'home,' and it's possible to go 'home.' And you're Truth and we're Truth. Why is this happening? How is this happening? ('Questioner' quoted in de Ruiter 1999: 102-103).

Thus, although de Ruiter no longer uses the language of divinity found in religious traditions such as Christianity, it still makes sense to say that his devotees venerate him in a religious sense.

Instead of using Christian references, de Ruiter is now just as likely to use pop culture in his authority claims. Anne recalls de Ruiter's claims that movies like, *The Green Mile*, *Powder*, and *The Matrix*—all of which feature characters that have messianic roles or supernatural powers—were "supposed to mean something, they were supposed to make you think that [the extraordinary character] was John in some way" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 25). Yvonne also remembers de Ruiter's penchant for teaching from movies:

> He does a lot of his teachings from movies, like, when [in] *The Matrix*, you know how Neo is 'the one,' well we all think John is 'the one.' He has this way of paralleling these super people, and in *Meet Joe Black*, he even said—and I'm sure I've got it on a tape—he goes like, 'I'm death' you know meet Joe Black 'you meet death,' well, 'you meet me, you meet death'. . . . He gets his themes from really interesting places and he knows how to use it [sic] and take that material (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 12).

De Ruiter's savvy with pop culture and mass media thus plays into his charismatic authority claims.

As we have seen, the *living embodiment of truth* is a religious, charismatic, representation of de Ruiter. Through this representation, de Ruiter is venerated by his devotees and is "considered extraordinary and

treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1958: 241). If anything, de Ruiter's authority claims have become more independent because of the removal of Christian references from his message and more conducive to those with a wide range of religious heritages. Sociologist of religion, Stephen Kent, summed up the extent of de Ruiter's charismatic sway over devotees saying, "[t]he group seemed to cross some sort of threshold, and that threshold was the extent to which [its members believe that] any of his actions are spiritually driven" (quoted in Piercey 2001). Thus, de Ruiter's relation to divinity has changed from the relatively subservient position of *messenger of Christ* to the more powerful, *living embodiment of truth*—a characterization that allows him to pursue a range of activities that would be deemed immoral for an ordinary person.

Once again, we must caution against seeing de Ruiter's ascendance to divinity as purely orchestrated and desired by de Ruiter himself. It is clear that de Ruiter's devotees played an equal role in this ascendance. Members who had been with de Ruiter for longer periods of time thus were at times resentful of the way that new, exotic, devotees often changed the general way that devotees comported themselves to de Ruiter. Anne reasons:

> I wouldn't totally . . . completely blame John for where it's gone to because, it is a group dynamic, I think. I mean, I think the more people that are just willing to, like, give up everything to him and the more people that, you know—women that [sic] are falling in love. Its like, people are giving him their power too. It's not like he was always

> taking, not even really in the beginning. People are so willing to give up, you know, that it kind of put someone in the position to be, like, 'okay, well . . . what do you do when women want to be with you and men are looking up to you?' and, you know . . . the dynamic is just going. . . . And like, I would be frustrated when people would, you know, be going up to him and kissing his feet and stuff and, 'cause then its just, like, 'why are you being so silly?' You know, like, it was almost like they were being more silly than John could ever be, you know what I mean? . . . I would [say] equal—equal party in the whole way that it's changed, for sure. . . . Yep, definitely a group effort (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 39-40).

The above discussion has shown that, in all three stages, the representation of de Ruiter as a divine spiritual teacher was clearly the product of the social arena of the group. Only through the group's services and other gatherings did the representation of de Ruiter as a divine being become accessible to the large numbers of people who now are devoted to him. In addition, the services and subsequent discussions about them, were central to the escalatory processes that led to increasingly extreme expressions of de Ruiter's extraordinariness; both the *modeling* process of 'one-upmanship' (occurring during meetings), and the *experience-sharing* among devotees (occurring primarily after meetings). Thus, it is fair to say that because of these meetings, perceptions of de Ruiter's divinity reached unprecedented heights.

In the course of my research, I have come across some other representations of de Ruiter that differ from the 'de Ruiter-as-divinity' image in interesting ways. Not surprisingly, these other characterizations of de Ruiter occur most commonly in social settings separate from those of the group's meetings. Thus, these differing views at times pose a challenge to the attitude of reverence towards de Ruiter that the group holds. In what follows, I outline these differing characterizations of de Ruiter, and end this display with an examination of de Ruiter's impression management strategies that aim to preserve the plausibility of the 'de Ruiter as divine' image for his followers.

Non-Divine Representations of de Ruiter

John the Deviant: Morally Depraved and Mad

The first non-divine representation of de Ruiter, most common among his critics, is the view that de Ruiter is in a number of ways morally depraved. Kent identifies the "basic strategy of the countercult movement by its continued *efforts to get ideological opponents socially labeled as intolerably deviant through allegations of illegal, immoral, and unethical practices*" (1990: 396 italics in original). A countermovement has indeed arisen in response to de Ruiter, touting its own representations—of de Ruiter as selfish, as manipulative, as a sex addict, as a charlatan, and as being under the influence of the devil. These representations most frequently cite de Ruiter's relationships with the Von Sass sisters, the financially lucrative nature of

Oasis Edmonton Inc.'s ventures, and perceived manipulative relations with followers, as evidence of 'unsaintly' motivations behind de Ruiter's actions.

The Internet has proven to be the most common place for these representations of de Ruiter to take place. Websites that offer various views of de Ruiter abound, particularly on weblogs, and among these, <www.kalilily.net> is most prolific. A general theme illustrated most poignantly here is that de Ruiter, "is a blue eyed, manipulative, hypnotist. A champion manipulator" ("anonymous" 2005). Another poster criticized de Ruiter for what he viewed as a hypocritical use of the words "honesty" and "surrender" in his teachings:

> I wish he'd thought of that before screwing around on his wife and family. Maybe if he'd stayed honest and surrendered his lust for power he might have had enough of what a spiritual leader is supposed to have to guide folks ethically. Obviously he knew the difference between right and wrong because he tried to convince Joyce to let him do it. He simply had no personal discipline, no care, no morality and went ahead with his betrayal for his own selfish wants (Fremenwarrior 2006).

Elsewhere, someone who claimed to be a "direct relative of the [group's] 'inner circle'" asks whether it is more likely that de Ruiter is guided by Truth, or rather that he is:

> really just an exploitive sociopath from the Canadian hinterland who came up with a great marketing ploy (selling a product you can't

> define) and is busy enjoying the fruits of his labours; namely sex, money, power? ("Withheld" 2005).

Someone who claims to have attended meetings summed up de Ruiter's teachings as a:

> philosophy that essentially assumes that one doesn't really have a responsibility to regard with respect the emotions of others when acting in ways that would affect their lives and emotions. That coldness is self absorption (Atreides 2004).

Thus, online, many people have advanced the representation of de Ruiter as morally deviant.

The representation of de Ruiter as morally deviant also abounds –though usually in a more tempered form—in the various popular press articles about de Ruiter, often serving as the 'other side of the story' to accounts given by his devotees. After attending one Amsterdam meeting, writer Brian Hutchinson wondered to himself why "anyone [would] follow this man, who seemed more like a huckster than an enlightened avatar, all the way to Alberta?" (Hutchinson 2001: 31). For his 1996 article about de Ruiter, reporter Scott McKeen sought the opinions of Jacob Johnson, pastor of Bible Baptist Church in Edmonton, who promptly accused de Ruiter of being "the founder of Edmonton's homegrown false cult. . . . John de Ruiter is one of the instruments the devil uses to deceive individuals" (1996: C2)—an accusation that is somewhat ironic in light of de Ruiter's similar 'Satan's Masterpiece' comments about mainline Christian traditions. Fred Bosma, who was

distraught at the loss of his children and grandchildren to the group, recalled saying to de Ruiter at a meeting, "'John . . . I have to talk to you . . . [Y]ou steal my children and my grandchildren. . . . [W]e have no access to them because of what you teach them'" (quoted in Piercey 2001).

Former member Yvonne also remembers with fascination what she saw as an amazing talent for manipulation in de Ruiter:

> I mean I gotta tell ya, I think back now, and I think about people sitting in that questioner's chair going up there firmly saying, like, 'I don't want to move to Edmonton,' like , 'I don't want to move *here*,' and by the time John's finished with them, they're like 'Oh, I'm gonna move here!'. . . . You see, . . . especially if your in his line of, I'll call it 'attack' but, if he's looking straight at you, I mean, I've had that experience with him where you know, he does something to you. He knows how to use energy, there's no doubt. . . . And maybe it's because you've given over your power, I don't know. But I really feel that, like, he really—you get into that space, where you're so kinda flat-lined, that a person comes in and can give all kinds of suggestions and boy, it seems to work really well. You know, I've seen people move places. He tells them to do this, or, he's told people to get married (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 5-6).

Thus, Yvonne's description of this particular communicative dynamic between de Ruiter and his devotees at meetings fits in with the image of de Ruiter as a 'master manipulator.'

A somewhat more sympathetic variation of the morally-deviant representation is one that sees him as a man who had started with good intentions but who was morally corrupted by the influence of his devotees. In her now famous confrontation with her husband about his affairs, Joyce de Ruiter said to him:

> 'My sweetie. You are not God, you are not [a] deity. . . . You are a normal man who has been seduced by power and adoring women. . . . You are sleeping with two of your disciples . . . and you can't recognize how far off you've gone. Sex with Benita and Katrina is not truth' (quoted in McKeen 2000: E7).

Devotee Susan Scott (pseudonym) also felt that, "'[p]eople started to spoil him and buy him expensive clothes. . . . In the beginning, we'd take him out to dinner, and he was so humble that he didn't want to order. Then after a while, when he went out he would ask for cigars or cigarettes'" (quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 35). Stephen Kent offered a sociological explanation that is complimentary to the 'moral corruption of a good man' view:

> 'People continue to feed the leader with the sense that he or she is special, that he or she is above the ordinary mundane world in which the rest of us live, [which] helps fuel this kind of exclusivity that many leaders breed. That kind of exclusivity often leads to trouble. People then feel that they are beyond the normal roles, that they are outside, that they're somehow special' (quoted in Piercey 2001).

Thus, among those who promulgate the 'morally corrupt' representation of de Ruiter, there seems to be a spectrum of opinions about the extent of his depravity. The least sympathetic view him as coldly calculating and manipulative, or as the devil's instrument, while views that are more sympathetic see de Ruiter as being a victim of the influence of disciples whose sexual tempting and constant praise were understandably difficult to resist.

Closely related to the image of de Ruiter as morally depraved is the one that sees him as *psychologically* deviant in a number of ways. This representation has been around since the earliest days of de Ruiter's ministry. Rebecca recalls that during the days of de Ruiter's pastorship at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, she:

> was already start[ing] to get kind of freaked out by the things he was saying. He was definitely going, you know, on the edge already. Branching off . . . I remember one particular sermon, he just wept, and wept, and wept and wept and wept and didn't say anything, and said, '*God wants to set you free, God wants to set you free,*' but he just wept. So, I mean, he was either um like this AMAZING man of God, radical, or he was a nut (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 22).

As well, de Ruiter himself seems to have entertained the possibility that he was insane at various times. Rebecca remembers that de Ruiter would "spend a lot of time on his back believing he was going schizophrenic" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 22). In a conversation with de Ruiter, reporter Scott

McKeen also became aware that de Ruiter knew very well that there was a fine line that divided whether or not people would judge him to be insane: "de Ruiter admits the story [of the visitations from Christ] sounds crazy. He concedes that a psychiatrist would probably diagnose him as schizophrenic or delusional" (McKeen 1996: C7).

Once again, perhaps the most extreme assertions of de Ruiter's insanity come from the world wide web. Already quoted above was a weblog post that labeled de Ruiter a "sociopath" (p. 66). On a video sharing website, someone posted a video of de Ruiter with the simple caption, "Edmonton's John de Ruiter is completely fucking insane" ("no name": 2005). Ali Sina, the founder of Faith Freedom International, a secularist organization dedicated to advising Muslims to leave Islam, wrote, "[a]ny sane person can see that this self proclaimed 'guru of gurus' is insane. But that is not what his followers see" (Sina 2004).

The assertion that "that is not what his followers see" shows how the deviancy and divine representations of de Ruiter are *totalistic*—they give *entire* explanations for de Ruiter's behavior. To change one's perceptions of de Ruiter from that of divinity to deviancy (or, visa versa) would require a complete re-socialization regarding de Ruiter—what Berger and Luckmann termed "alternation" (1966: 157). Thus, because of their total quality, there seems to be little possibility of seeing the divinity and deviancy representations as concomitantly plausible to any extent.

John the 'Ordinary Guy'

The next representation of de Ruiter that poses a challenge to the divine representation is that which sees de Ruiter simply as an *ordinary guy*. The sentiment, "[s]hoemaker to Messiah?" (Marshall 1998: D1) most poignantly illustrates the tensions between the 'ordinary guy' and divine representations. This representation arises primarily from backstage encounters with de Ruiter that elicit perceptions of him that are simply incommensurable with what one would expect of a divinity. Joyce de Ruiter, John's companion for nineteen years, had a 'backstage pass' in John's life, and de Ruiter's ascendance to divinity was clearly something that she struggled with. Near the end of her relationship with de Ruiter, she confronted 'John the divinity' *as his wife*, an act she clearly intended to serve as a demonstration of the dissonance between two of de Ruiter's roles. She pleaded with him, "'Dear John, my dear John . . . I am the only one who loves John, the man. Everyone else loves John the God'" (quoted in McKeen 2000: E7).

At times, members also accidentally gained access to de Ruiter's backstage regions. These experiences created the same type of cognitive dissonance that Joyce experienced—though certainly to a lesser degree. Anne relayed a number of stories of encounters with de Ruiter—outside the space of group meetings—that seemed to undermine for her the image of de Ruiter as divine. About five or six months after she had left the group, she was surprised to find herself sitting next to de Ruiter and Katrina Von Sass in a movie theatre. She still had a reverent fear of de Ruiter, and, uncomfortable

with the seating arrangement, she asked to switch spots with a friend to avoid sitting next to them. Her attitude changed, however, when she sensed that he was just as uncomfortable to see her as she was of him. She remembers:

> he knew that it was me, and it seemed like he was pretending that he didn't see me, or, I don't know, I don't know why, it was really weird, it was a little bit awkward. Maybe, maybe it almost seemed like when, when he wasn't in the space of the meeting and all the people sitting there and him on the stage and the special lighting, and, you know, and everything, then it was, like—then he had that power to, like, spread his message, right? But then when I sit next to him in a movie theatre, he, like, looked like he was like trying to avoid looking at me because he didn't have his [power]. . . . Maybe I was being a little, I was kind of like smirking and laughing, like, 'you know, this guy doesn't have all this power, he's, like, embarrassed to look at me right now' (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 24).

Thus, in the every-day world of this encounter, Anne's reverent fear of de Ruiter no longer seemed to her to be appropriate or justified, and in that moment the last vestiges of their charismatic relationship were laid to rest.

Another 'backstage' encounter between Anne and de Ruiter provoked a similar reaction. During her days as a member, she went to parties held by de Ruiter's followers that de Ruiter also attended. She remembered that at these parties:

> if John started dancing, especially like with Joyce, everyone would gather around and watch and it was this big, you know, amazing thing that John was dancing, you know, and um, he was the worst dancer that I have ever seen in my entire life. Like . . . I was always kind of like, you know, (laugh) . . . thought that I . . . knew some things or whatever about dancing, so I would be like 'oh, he's such a bad dancer'—like really weird. Like, have you ever seen the Seinfeld . . . episode like with Elaine [laughing while doing a dancing motion]? He dances like that, right? Yeah, he dances like that, which is, you know whatever, it's cute, but I used to say, 'how can someone that, like, *enlightened*—and he's supposed to have all these powers—be such a horrible dancer!' [laughter] Like, wouldn't he know that he's a bad dancer and . . . [that] he should just sit down? [laughter] Ah, its funny! (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 27-28).

In my viewing of de Ruiter group meetings from videos and audiotapes, de Ruiter would occasionally crack a joke, and his devotees would laugh along with him, but the laughing *at* de Ruiter displayed in the above scenario is of a different, far less reverent, quality. Peter Berger saw humor as something that "recognizes the comic discrepancy in the human condition . . . mock[ing] the serious business of this world and the mighty who carry it out" (1969: 88). The comedy for Anne was clearly of this quality. Confronted with a discrepancy between the views of de Ruiter as divine and the 'ordinary guy'

view arising from the situation of his reputedly bad dancing, she could not help but laugh.

At another encounter with de Ruiter during a wedding ceremony, she was surprised to find that de Ruiter was confused about what was actually taking place. (De Ruiter had previously unofficially married the couple, and at this time they were choosing to officially wed). She remembers:

> standing beside him and I remember him whispering to the person beside him and saying, 'Are they actually getting married? I thought this was . . . a reception or a party or something.' You know, and I was, like, 'I thought John's supposed to know everything!' you know? . . . I mean, I didn't want to . . . take away the specialness of him being there, because it was supposed to be . . . a big special thing that, you know—this was a real true union if, if John came to witness it, and everything like that. . . . And I was kind of laughing that he, you know, he didn't even know what he was coming to and he messed up, and then you could see that he was a bit embarrassed. . . . It was kind of funny, 'cause it was just like John was supposed to be aware of everything, right, or at least he made it seem like he was always aware of everything, like he knew all the time what was going on (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 27).

In this instance, Anne felt that her less-than-sacred view of de Ruiter jeopardized the "specialness" associated with his attendance at the wedding, and for this reason, she refrained from making her newly-discovered

irreverent attitude known to others present because she sensed that it would spoil their experience. The three experiences relayed above clearly opened up for Anne a way of seeing de Ruiter as an ordinary guy; a perception that—because of de Ruiter's divine pretensions—became comical and thus antithetical to the worshipful attitude that accompanies viewing him as a divine being.

Rather than seeming funny, Yvonne's reaction to her backstage encounter with de Ruiter angered her, and served as impetus—among other things—for her to eventually leave the group. She remembers:

> [t]here was this Husky station [a gas station] . . . and I used to see his truck there quite often and one time I went there and I was gassing up and I had to walk around the back and I saw his truck in the bay and I said to one of the guys, 'I know the guy who owns that truck' and I said 'Oh it's in here again!' and the guy says, 'Oh yeah it's in here all of the time and he always goes up to the mountains and he's always wrecking it. You know, he loves to four-wheel drive.' That's what kind of pissed me off, because I think that he's got a really good life, I mean because he does these meetings what, maybe fourteen, sixteen hours a week and the rest of the time it just seems, I could be wrong, but, it seems like he's out just gallivanting (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 12).

The thought of de Ruiter enjoying the success of his ministry in a stereotypically Albertan fashion—i.e. with a big truck and a reckless

attitude— incensed Yvonne. In this moment, she realized that de Ruiter's ministry afforded him a lot of money and leisure time, while she herself felt overwhelmed by the temporal and financial costs associated with being a devotee. From the earliest days of his ministry, the financial support that de Ruiter's followers provided him was justified by the idea that, "'[h]e was supposed to be studying during the week,'" but Joyce always was uncomfortable with that arrangement because she "'didn't see him doing a whole lot to earn it. . . . [H]e slept a lot and piddled around with other things'" (quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 33). When Yvonne inadvertently glimpsed de Ruiter's backstage self at the Husky station and saw him as someone who spends his free time not as a divinity, but rather in a way that one might expect of any ordinary Albertan male with enough money, her feelings of reverence evaporated.

John the Philosopher

Writing about the Canadian 'new religions/countercult' debate, Stephen Kent has outlined various normative strategies that religiously deviant ideological organizations use in order to attain social acceptability (1990). One strategy, he notes, is that, "[o]ccasionally groups will deny their religious roots and instead claim connections with other societally accepted structures or normative practices, such as science, business, medicine, psychotherapy, or other forms of healing" (1990: 400). I believe that de Ruiter has employed this strategy with his online and advertisement personas. Online, and in publications aimed at curious outsiders, de Ruiter most consistently wears the

hat of author/philosopher. Thus, the final 'non-divine' representation of de Ruiter that I examine in this chapter is one that de Ruiter *himself* presents.

De Ruiter's website, <www.johnderuiter.com>, is headlined, "An Introduction to the Integrated Philosophy of John de Ruiter." In a sub-category on the page, de Ruiter does not refer to group meetings as religious services, but rather calls them "seminars." He refers to the building in which these meetings take place as the "College of Integrated Philosophy." At the bottom of the page is an invitation to come and listen to "integrative philosopher, author, and public speaker John de Ruiter." Nowhere on the site does it mention the miracles that attendees claim to experience, de Ruiter's background as a Christian minister, de Ruiter's history of claiming to have experienced direct communication with Christ, or his devotees' worshipful comportments towards him.

Pictures also seem to represent de Ruiter as a philosopher on the website. Here, de Ruiter is clad in blazers or button up shirts, looking professorial rather than like popular conceptions of a religious guru. Absent are any pictures such as those found in Hutchinson's "The Gospel according to John" article, where de Ruiter stares intensely out from the page, where devotees are seen kissing de Ruiter or hugging his feet, where they are crying in their seats, or where Joyce de Ruiter and Katrina Von Sass share a warm embrace. From the pictures and quotations on the site, it would thus be difficult for the casual web surfer to recognize the charismatic nature of de Ruiter's relationships with his devotees, or that there are religious aspects to his teachings.

Rather than advertising to those who are looking for religion, de Ruiter instead addresses people with an interest in psychology in the "literature" section of the webpage,. Dr. Carl Mindell, a former Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at New York's Albany Medical College, lends a quote to the site. He states that de Ruiter's:

> psychology is the most comprehensive I have ever come across. It is the most related to real life. I love that his teaching is the most alive in that he doesn't teach what he has read somewhere or heard from a teacher. He speaks only what he himself knows to be true. That is so exceptional (Oasis 2006c).[19]

Thus, here de Ruiter's attributes include *psychological brilliance* rather than divinity.

Elsewhere on the page, de Ruiter conceives of his philosophy as something that is not religious precisely because it is *more fundamental* than religion. A poster for de Ruiter's seminars claims that de Ruiter "reveals the *true essence* of philosophy, religion and psychology" (Oasis 2006a). In "John de Ruiter Speaks about Truth," an introductory pamphlet to de Ruiter's teachings, de Ruiter responds to Stephen Kent's claim that the group represented, "the start of a new religion" by saying, "I am not starting a new religion, I am unveiling what is real. Reality does not ever originate from

---

[19] It must be noted that Mindell's claim about the comprehensiveness of de Ruiter's psychology seems at odds with a disclaimer that appears at the bottom of the webpage. This disclaimer warns that, "[t]hese teachings based on individual choice, offered by John de Ruiter and Oasis Edmonton Inc., are not to be understood as a substitute for the accurate and appropriate medical or psychological assessment, diagnosis or treatment prescribed in a one-on-one relationship with a physician or mental health professional" (Oasis 2006b).

religion, rather religion can arise from reality, and on its own falls" (quoted in Oasis 2003a: 3).

Thus, on these posters, brochures, and websites, de Ruiter is touted as an extremely wise philosopher, as an author, as a public speaker, and as a pioneering psychologist, but never as a religious figure. If it is the case, as I maintain above (p. 64-65), that the representation of de Ruiter as divine only becomes plausible *at meetings*, then the 'philosopher' representation that de Ruiter exhibits for the general public makes sense from a recruitment perspective. It would be wholly ineffectual to attempt to represent de Ruiter as divine in these media because they are aimed at the general public—a group largely unfamiliar with de Ruiter's meetings. If the website were to contain specifically religious references, or to outline the way in which de Ruiter's devotees worship him, then all these representations would do is elicit distaste among all those who are suspicious of new religions, those who are committed to an exclusive religious tradition, and those who are thoroughly secular.

Intra-Group Impression Management Strategies

In the previous sections, I have outlined some of the common representations and perceptions of de Ruiter held by those concerned with him. Some of these views see de Ruiter as divine, while others serve as alternatives to the divine representation. One of these alternative representations, namely that of 'John the philosopher,' is *complimentary* to de

Ruiter's religious career, specifically in the way it aids his recruitment strategies.

Another common representation of de Ruiter, however—namely the view of him as psychologically or morally deviant—seems inherently threatening to the divine representation. It is initially surprising, then, that de Ruiter does little to counter these representations. Perhaps the reason for this lack of effort is that the deviancy representations originate most often from disgruntled former members, from the press, from distraught family members of devotees, or from secular or Christian members of the countercult movement, rather than from devotees themselves. As I have already illustrated above (p. 71), the deviancy representations are *totalistic* and therefore mutually exclusive with the divine representation. For this reason, it is unlikely that *devotees* will see the 'de Ruiter as deviant' representations as plausible to any extent. Thus, the deviancy representations do not present a serious problem for de Ruiter in terms of *intra-group* impression management. For de Ruiter to argue at a group meeting that he is wise rather than insane, or that he is good rather than selfish and manipulative, would be literally to preach to the converted.

Much more threatening, however, to the intra-group perceptions of de Ruiter as divine, are the backstage encounters responsible for the 'ordinary guy' representations illustrated above. These backstage encounters *do* seem impactful enough to dissuade already-committed followers from seeing the 'de Ruiter as divine' representation as plausible. Accordingly, de Ruiter, with

the help of his cadre, has undertaken to make sure that these backstage encounters between him and devotees are as infrequent as possible. Also, when these encounters do happen, de Ruiter has methods of ensuring that these experiences are not shared amongst other devotees. Before I outline de Ruiter's strategies for preventing backstage encounters, however, I will first examine the "front" that he presents to devotees at group meetings.

Goffman breaks his conception of "the front" into three constituent components: "the setting, the appearance, and manner" (1959: 29). The setting involves such things as furniture, décor, physical layout etc. Goffman notes that, "it is only in exceptional circumstances that the setting follows along with the performers. . . . In the main, these exceptions seem to offer some kind of extra protection for performers who are, or who have momentarily become, highly sacred" (1959: 22). As outlined in detail in chapter two, the setting of a de Ruiter group meeting presents an example of one such exceptional circumstance, as it does indeed follow de Ruiter wherever he brings his ministry. There is an uncanny similarity between the physical arrangements of group meetings, from Edmonton, to Hawaii (viewable on *An Evening with John de Ruiter* [Oasis 1998]), to Poona, India (viewable on *John de Ruiter Speaks about Truth: Innermost Blossoming* [Oasis Edmonton Inc. 2000]).

The most fundamental concern in the design of these settings seems to be that de Ruiter is *central*. He always sits elevated in the middle-front of the setting, in the direct sight-lines of all who are present, and the use of

microphones and speakers assures that his voice is heard above all others. In the College of Integrated Philosophy, his face is projected onto two ten-foot screens that are elevated and situated on either side of him. Special lighting gives de Ruiter an aura of importance as well. Finally, de Ruiter's performance entails the use of an array of special props—a fan, an elegantly-carved wooden table, a plant, and a glass of water—which indicate that he is to be accorded special treatment in the setting of meetings. The centrality of de Ruiter to the setting also is reflected by the performances of devotees, who, when de Ruiter enters the room, immediately become quiet, take their seats, and stare intently at him.

Goffman's conceptions of "appearance" and "manner' are closely related:

> 'appearance' may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses. These stimuli also tell us of the individual's temporary ritual state. . . . 'Manner' may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the same time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation (Goffman 1959: 24).

De Ruiter's appearance appears to be something that has been carefully and consciously crafted over the years of his ministry. Yvonne had some ruminations on this topic, saying, "he's got the long blonde hair . . . and he looks kind of like the pictures you would have thought Jesus would have looked like, some pictures that you've seen" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 11). She also remembers how Jeanne Parr, a retired CBS news reporter and

independent television producer from New York who became enamored with him at a Maui meeting, was instrumental in tuning de Ruiter's image to be more appropriate for the circles in which she ran. Remembers Yvonne:

> A lot of people were saying that Jeanne was really trying to change John and . . . change his image from sort of a more of a redneck [image]. . . . He started wearing the nice clothes and . . . she took him to New York to introduce him to a whole slough of really rich people down there (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 11).

Hutchinson also mentions Parr's involvement with the management of de Ruiter's appearance, writing:

> 'John didn't have any education, he had long hippie hair, he was kind of a bumpkin,' says one close observer. Parr advised de Ruiter on his wardrobe, which had consisted mainly of jeans and T-shirts. She told him that to be taken seriously, he would have to tie his hair back (2001: 35).

In terms of his "manner," de Ruiter's slow and sparse style seems to relay the message to his devotees that his words are profoundly precious. This valuing is enacted in the performances of devotees as well—many of whom write down in their notebooks every word that de Ruiter speaks. Microphones and speakers are also interpretable as part of de Ruiter's manner of self-importance when addressing the audience. At times, de Ruiter also chooses not to answer devotees' questions at all (the effect of which I will explore further in chapter four), and this practice of ignoring seems to convey to his

devotees the message that his topical preferences for the conversations are authoritative.

Simultaneously enacted with the front stage impression-management strategies are those strategies that de Ruiter uses to conceal from his devotees his *backstage* regions and self. First, de Ruiter has undertaken a series of legal actions aimed at silencing certain members who have in the past been granted special access to de Ruiter's backstage areas. One of these actions was against Jeanne Parr. Because of her expertise in television, Parr was instrumental in the production of some of de Ruiter's videos, lending her skills to *John de Ruiter Speaks About Truth: Bonds of Being* (Editor and Producer) and *An Evening with John de Ruiter*, which was shot in Maui (Producer) among other videos. Parr also had plans to shoot a documentary about de Ruiter, and, according to de Ruiter, she made "approximately 50 videotapes"—some of them with this aim (Oasis vs. Parr *Statement of Claim* 2001: para. 4). In December 1999, when Parr became disillusioned with de Ruiter because of his adulterous relationships, she left Edmonton, taking the tapes with her. She is quoted in Hutchinson as saying that, while she "miss[es] his teachings on higher consciousness . . . [she] can't sweep his behavior—what he's done to his family—under the carpet" (2001: 35-36). It seems that de Ruiter and Oasis Edmonton Inc. perceived that Parr's possession of the tapes was now a threat, and subsequently sued her, asking for "an interim and permanent injunction restraining the Defendant [Parr] from making use of the Videotapes" (Oasis Vs. Parr *Statement of Claim* 2001:

para. 9). In the court files, there was no statement of defense from Parr, indicating that she either settled with de Ruiter out of court, or that, from the United States, she has not bothered to deal with the suit.

De Ruiter and Oasis Edmonton Inc. took a similar action against Boots Beaudry. According to the plaintiffs, Beaudry, "in her capacity as a volunteer . . . was provided with materials belonging to Oasis which were intended for the benefit of Oasis or John de Ruiter" (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Claim* 2005: para. 4). Beaudry failed to return the materials, and as a result, de Ruiter and Oasis sued, asking for the documents back as well as "such further and other relief as this Honourable Court deems just" (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Claim* 2005: para. 9). In her statement of defense, Beaudry claims that she was not holding the materials maliciously, but rather that they may have been thrown out inadvertently when she moved out of the Royal Acupuncture Clinic—a business she owned (Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Defense* 2005: 1). At her court appearance, she returned one tape she had found that belonged to de Ruiter (Oasis vs. Oasis vs. Beaudry *Statement of Defense* 2005: 1).

Indications are that de Ruiter has also taken legal action against his former wife, Joyce. She told reporter Jeremy Loome that she "ha[s] agreed to not do anything that is potentially harmful to his earning potential" (quoted in Loome 2006b: 19). Presumably, de Ruiter is worried that books or interviews that included her views might tarnish his image.

What Beaudry, Parr, and Joyce de Ruiter all have in common is that they present threats to front stage representations of de Ruiter by virtue of their formerly intimate relationships with him. All three were at one time part of de Ruiter's inner circle, operating on a more 'everyday' level with de Ruiter than that of the regular devotee. Thus, all three had access to materials and experiences of de Ruiter that no doubt could challenge the 'divine' representation in the very ways that backstage encounters did for Yvonne and Anne.

De Ruiter and Oasis also sued 996399 Alberta Ltd. over a failed deal to rent the company's premises at 12850 and 12850A -149 street in Edmonton (Oasis vs 996399 *Statement of Claim* 2003: pgh 3), presumably for the purposes of holding their services there. In order for 996399 Alberta Ltd. to have confidence in the deal, however, it requested the financial records of Oasis, which Oasis provided, allegedly on the condition that 996399 Alberta Inc. was to "hold all information contained in the financial information confidential, making no copies of the documents nor distributing and information contained therein (Oasis vs. 996399 *Statement of Claim* 2003: para. 4). 996399 Alberta Inc. allegedly has, "refused or neglected to return Oasis' financial information to them," thus the reason for the suit (Oasis vs. 996399 *Statement of Claim* 2003: para. 7).

Such detailed accounts of Oasis's revenue could indeed be very damaging to the divine perceptions of de Ruiter that his followers hold. As I have illustrated above (p. 75), Yvonne became angered at the thought of de Ruiter

spending lots of money on his truck, and Joyce de Ruiter felt uncomfortable with John's followers tithing practices when she knew that he mostly "'slept a lot and piddled around'" (quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 33). This type of disillusionment could conceivably happen on a much wider scale among his followers if his entire financial records were to show that he was becoming rich off his ministry.

Finally, de Ruiter and his inner circle have been taking other measures—without the court system—which seem aimed at preventing his devotees from having backstage access to him. Much of this move towards making de Ruiter less accessible to devotees than he had been in the past has occurred since Benita Von Sass took a greater role in the organization. As Yvonne comments:

> there was, I guess, a sense of community and I guess in the early days there was even more because we used to sometimes have parties and gatherings for some of John's birthdays and stuff and that kinda stopped later. Like, we used to have Christmas—well not Christmas but like a New Year's party and that—but it seemed that when he got together with Benita, his second wife, then it just seemed—I don't think she wanted him to be—many people feel like she didn't really want him to be as accessible. But in the early days he was so much more accessible and that made it really fun (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005d: 13).

Thus, the parties that elicited the 'ordinary guy/terrible dancer' perceptions that Anne experienced (above, p. 73) are no longer occurring.

Control over media has also increased at group meetings. Hutchinson writes that:

> de Ruiter has become more guarded than ever about his affairs. . . . [T]he company insists followers who take his photograph hand their film over for development 'in order to determine that all images are appropriately representative of John for the general public. . . . Any negatives deemed unsuitable by Oasis [are] permanently marked, so that they not be copied' (2001: 36).

Thus, this policy enables de Ruiter to prevent the development and distribution of photographs that would be harmful to his front stage divine representation if they were to depict him conducting himself in a backstage manner.

Oasis exacts similar control over print media. Oasis has always permitted devotees to take personal notes during sessions with de Ruiter, but the "Marketing and Public Relations Department" took action when some devotees began distributing these notes amongst themselves. In their "Distribution of Meeting Notes Policy" Oasis worries that:

> such enthusiasm [the sharing of notes] easily and unintentionally ends up doing John and Oasis a great disservice if quotes are not entirely accurate, accurate but lacking the necessary frame of reference (verbal or other) in which they were spoken, or relatively sensational in

> nature. Unnecessary confusion for readers and even negative attention and publicity often arise – something John's Public Relations Department does its best to monitor through personally confirming the content and any dissemination of John's teachings, with John himself (Oasis 2004b: 1).

Thus, even if backstage slippages occur in meeting settings, through 'slips of the tongue' on de Ruiter's part, or through a particularly unsuccessful or less-than-profound dialogues with questioners, de Ruiter has (or, at least he *seeks* to have) complete control over the proliferation of these events in media.

Conclusion

In his most influential and oft-cited work, Goffman is concerned with the presentation of the self in *everyday* life. The application of his dramaturgical analysis to charismatic leadership is interesting precisely because there is *nothing* 'everyday' about the self that the charismatic leader presents. Extraordinary or superhuman claims are in fact antithetical to the 'ordinary person' impressions that most people elicit while performing in wider society. De Ruiter's "front" is in fact not comported to the wider society in which we all live, but rather to the carefully-crafted and controlled social arena of group meetings—a "theatre" that is predominantly filled with devotees who are in charismatic relationships with him. Thus, if we were to extend Goffman's theatrical allegory to include de Ruiter's intentional dealings with wider society, then we might consider his website, brochures, and posters to be 'the

lobby' or 'the ticket booth;' for, it is through the persona of 'John the philosopher' that he welcomes the curious inside.

In this chapter, I have outlined the various representations of de Ruiter that exist within and outside of group meetings, paying especially close attention to the three-stage development of his divine persona. I have taken direction from Kent's (1990) work on normative strategies and deviance labeling that groups use in their efforts to gain societal legitimacy, and Goffman's work on 'the presentation of the self' by people and groups trying to cultivate favorable images. Up until now, however, I have done little to investigate the particular social-psychological *processes* through which de Ruiter's followers come to see him as divine. An exploration of the importance of de Ruiter's silences and staring to these processes will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Four: The Charismatic Significance of John de Ruiter's Silence at de Ruiter Group Meetings [20]

Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves

~ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

The pause; that impressive silence, that eloquent silence, that geometrically progressive silence which often achieves a desired effect where no combination of words, however so felicitous, could accomplish it

~ Mark Twain (1959: 198).

Introduction

Popular wisdom accords silence a whole host of qualities and meanings. Sometimes, silence elicits feelings of *anticipation*—especially with regard to the sacred. Ralph Waldo Emerson plainly took this view when he urged, "Let us be silent that we may hear the whispers of the gods" (2000: 211). "Christmas spirit" is also very dependent on this quality. The silent night was the *holy* night—rife with expectation—when (according to Christians) the Word miraculously "became flesh" (John 1: 14).[21] Sometimes, we also view

[20] Portions of this chapter appear in an article published in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (see Joosse 2006)

[21] A child's experience of anticipatory silence during Christmas eve is considerably less abstract. So goes the rhyme:
"'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse…
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads."

silence as *curative* or *bonding*. Poet Oliver Wendell Holmes compared silence to "a poultice, [which] comes to heal the blows of sound" (1912: 58). David Gahan, in Depeche Mode's biggest hit, sang:

> *Words like violence*
> *Break the silence*
> *Come crashing in*
> *Into my little world...*
> *All I ever wanted*
> *All I ever needed*
> *Is here in my arms*
> *Words are very unnecessary*
> *They can only do harm...*
> *Enjoy the silence* (Gore 1990).

Alternatively again, we sometimes view silence as a *mask* that can conceal ignorance. The *Book of Proverbs* declares that "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue" (17: 28). Finally, sometimes, as Charles deGaulle wrote, "'silence is the ultimate weapon of power'" (quoted in Toliver 2004: 374). We are aware of how the oppressed are *silenced*, and also of how the powerful keep hold of power through the silence of secrecy.

These many meanings and qualities allow for a multitude of interpretations when silence occurs interpersonally— and the meetings of 'the de Ruiter group' are no exception. John de Ruiter's silent teaching at group meetings provokes both consternation and wonder from bystanders and devotees alike. This chapter explores the dynamics of interpersonal silence within charismatic relationships, and posits a novel link between silence and the cultivation of charisma. To illustrate this link, I perform an in-depth examination of the meetings of the de Ruiter group, and postulate that John de

Ruiter's use of prolonged periods of silence is the most important component in his cultivation of charismatic bonds with followers. De Ruiter's former wife Joyce put it most simply, saying, "'[s]ilence . . . is John's specialty'" (quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 36).

The charismatic relationship, as Max Weber originally conceived it, is predicated on the belief that a leader is "endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1947: 358). I contend that three aspects/qualities of interpersonal silence enable de Ruiter to perform seemingly *miraculous feats*, helping his devotees to "'attribut[e] to him a status beyond human'" (Stephen Kent quoted in Hutchinson 2001: 34). First, the *projection-eliciting* aspect of interpersonal silence fosters the belief within devotees that de Ruiter has the ability to speak to the specific personal needs of people whom he has never met. Second, silence's *punitive* aspect enables de Ruiter to perform superhuman displays of power over others at meetings. Third, de Ruiter's use of silence fosters the belief that he has a miraculous ability to form *intimate bonds* with complete strangers, simply by gazing at them.

The Precedent of Gurus' Use of Silence within Charismatic Relationships

To my knowledge, this is the first social-scientific study of the use of silence by a religiously charismatic leader to cultivate and enhance charismatic bonds. Religious leaders' use of silence—particularly among

gurus[22] within the Hindu tradition—is by no means unprecedented, however. Below, I briefly outline the use of charismatic silence by four religious teachers whose ministries predate de Ruiter's. These other gurus may use silence in ways that are analogous to de Ruiter's uses.

Indications are that Ramakrisha (1836-1886) often made use of silence in his meetings with devotees. Mahendranath Gupta recalls a meeting where "all sat in silence" and where Ramakrishna asked:

> 'Well, all these people are sitting here without a word. There eyes are fixed on me. They are neither talking nor singing. What do they see in me?'
>
> M. said to the Master: 'Sir, they have already heard many things you have said. Now they are seeing what they can never see anywhere else—a man always blissful, of childlike nature, free from egotism, and intoxicated with divine love' (quoted in Gupta 1977: 918).

Ramakrishna's disciple, Swami Vivekananda, who would become an influential teacher in his own right, advised, "'Do not spend your energy talking, but meditate in silence. . . . Accumulate power in silence, and become a dynamo of spirituality'" (quoted in Chetanananda 1976: 79).

Ramana Maharishi (1879-1950) also made powerful use of silence in his satsangs. "Who" recalled that the sage:

> teaches more by Silence than by word of mouth. Visitors come to him from far and near with bundles of questions; but when they take their

[22] The term "guru" is Sanskrit, and is defined in ancient Vedic scriptures as meaning "enlightened teacher."

> seats in his presence after making due obeisance, they forget to put their questions; and after a time find that the questions have evaporated (1967: 13).

Godman also was aware of the power of Ramana Maharishi's silences. He writes:

> These silent teachings consisted of a spiritual force which seemed to emanate from his form. . . . The people who were attuned to this force report that they experienced it as a state of inner peace and well-being; in some advanced devotees it even precipitated a direct experience of the Self (1985: 105).

Non-Hindu teachers have also taught silently. Silence was clearly integral to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's (1931-1990) interactions with his followers. Besides being a key component of the "dynamic meditation" that his devotees endured (see Osho 2000: 201-202; Ellwood and Partin 1988: 208, 211-212), he also often went into periods of prolonged silence himself, explaining its value to his followers:

> 'Being silent, hearing silence, doing nothing and being interior, deeper than all expression, that is satsang. One simply sits with the Master, feeling his presence, becoming part of his energy-field, breathing with him, pulsating with him. Slowly, slowly, the ego dissolves of its own accord, just as the sun rises and the snow starts melting' (quoted in Joshi 1982: 159-160).

Indications are that Rajneesh also used interpersonal silence in a punitive manner at times. Christopher Calder, who was a long-time devotee of Rajneesh, recalled during one of his visits to the group's ashram:

> in 1988, Rajneesh was in silence because he was angry at his own disciples. He wanted his sannyasins to demonstrate in the streets against some Indian officials who had spoken out against him. Wisely, no one was interested in creating a new confrontation. This spell of sanity among the flock irritated Rajneesh, who cancelled public talks as punishment.

Thus, here silence creates a separation from, rather than a mystical merging with, the guru.

Finally, perhaps best example is the Sufi mystic and self-proclaimed "God in human form" (quoted in Davy 1981: 562), Meher Baba. It is clear that silence played a crucial role in his charismatic relationships with followers. From 1925 until his death in 1969, he did not utter a word, instead communicating to his followers by pointing at an alphabet-board and later, through sign language (Ellwood and Partin 1988: 217). Though it never came, the highly anticipated 'breaking' of Baba's silence was strongly linked to the group's millenarian beliefs. Baba declared:

> 'Of My own I shall not break My Silence; universal Crisis will make me do so. When the Crisis will reach its absolute culmination, it will make Me utter the WORD at that moment. . . . As I am the PIVOT of

> the Universe, the full pressure of the universal upheaval will bear on Me' (quoted in Davy 1981: 568).

Baba made clear that his silence might end "at any time, any hour, any day. That Moment is not far away" (quoted in Davy 1981: 568) and indeed often promised to break his silence at particular moments, most notably during a visit to Hollywood in 1932 (Purdom 1937: 235). After falling through on such promises, he would teasingly rebuke his followers:

> 'Did you think I would speak on a specific date in a large hall before a crowd of people? I went into Silence without giving warning and I will speak in the same way – who knows when? But when I speak the whole world will know and realize who I am!' (quoted in Davy 1981: 95).

Baba died silently in 1969, and though the "whole world" has yet to make such a realization, accounts of his life continue inspire many seekers world-wide.

The above examples merely illustrate that the use of silence by religiously charismatic leaders is not unprecedented and that it seems well suited to the development and intensification of charismatic bonds. In what follows, I will use the more substantial data that I have gathered on the de Ruiter group to theorize how three aspects of this silence are integral to processes that create and enhance charismatic relationships. These three aspects are a) silence's projection-eliciting quality, b) silence's punitive aspect, c) and silence's effectiveness for creating and enhancing intimacy.

Silence: a Medium of Projection and Inference

In this attempt at understanding the communicative dynamics of de Ruiter group meetings, the first aspect of interpersonal silence that is of particular interest is its ability to elicit *projection* and *inference*. Political leaders at times take advantage of this aspect, as communication theorist Barry Brummett found in his 1980 study, *Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy*. While conventional wisdom suggests that political leaders gain a following by persuading their listeners to accept the content of their arguments, Brummett contended that sometimes, the *absence* of content can be rhetorically effective and politically strategic because it elicits an increased involvement of the audience in political discourse.

Silence from political leaders seems striking because, by the nature of their profession, they are engaged in a nearly continuous dialogue with the public. If a politician suddenly and purposely disengages from this dialogue, then "the public's attention is riveted on the silence as it tries to attribute meanings to it" (Brummett 1980: 290). Brummett further explains the dynamics of silence between political leaders and their audiences in this way:

> [a] silent, passive persona has relinquished control over defining and shaping the world. Even if a silent persona is actually doing a great deal, definition of those actions has been relinquished to the speculation of the press and public, speculation that will find mystery,

passivity, etc., in those actions. Silence allows unchecked inference about one's motives and actions (1980: 293-294).

Thus, politicians may choose to use silence *strategically* if they estimate that the inferences of the public will be favorable to their causes.

Other communication theorists have made claims similar to Brummett's about the projection-eliciting quality of interactive silences. Thomas Bruneau wrote, "lengthy interactive silences appear to allow each participant a chance to make inferences and judgments about the many possible meanings of a message (including the meaning of the silences)" (1973: 29). Adam Jaworski saw silence in terms of Marshall McLuhan's division of media into *hot* and *cool*. For him, silence is one of the coolest mediums because it requires "from the participants more filling in, more completion, and higher participation than communicating in speech" (Jaworski 1993: 141). Thus, there is some agreement in the communications literature that our pursuit of understanding is not limited to the words that we hear. We seek to understand the meanings of silences as well; and when there are gaps in our readings of the world, we will attempt to fill them in through projection and inference.

Leaders' strategic use of this projection-eliciting aspect of silence can have divergent results. That is, the attributions and projections of the audience may or may not be favorable towards the leader. One may marvel at the silent leader, wondering what his or her next action will be, or one may come to suspect that the leader is not speaking because he or she *does not know* what to say next. Regardless of this inherent danger, the increase of

listener participation in the leader-listener dialogue and the achievement of an aura of mystery around a leader can make silence a powerful leadership strategy.

The meetings of the de Ruiter group illustrate how silence can facilitate this 'reading in,' or, projection of meaning in a *religious* context. One important difference, however, between religious and political contexts is crucial to note. While the focus of political discourse is the internal and external affairs of the *state*, those who attend de Ruiter's meetings usually come with the aim of personal fulfillment or self-understanding. Sociologist of religion Stephen Kent, who has attended several meetings and has spoken with several former and current members posited, "Much of what's going on with de Ruiter, I think, is that people are trying to make sense of their own autobiographies" (quoted in Piercey 2001). Thus, the difference between the religious context of de Ruiter's meetings and the political context described by Brummett is that the meanings that de Ruiter's listeners project (as opposed to those of the body politic) are *highly personal*.

Experts on new religious movements have confirmed that followers of John de Ruiter project highly personalized meanings and insights into de Ruiter's vague words and long silences. In Hutchinson, Kent said of de Ruiter's followers, "'for years they've been reading New Age and spiritual material. . . . They can project onto John what they know and what they need. Silence is the perfect vehicle for that projection'" (2001: 33). Likewise, sociologist of religion David Lane surmised, "'such experiences [the merging

of de Ruiter's being with his followers] are a function of what a believer wants or expects to happen – not the guru'" (quoted in Legge 1997: D8). K. Gordon Neufeld, a former member of the Unification Church, theorized, "Mr. de Ruiter has fashioned himself into a mirror, onto which his followers project whatever image they want to see" (2001: 7). One reflective interviewer and admirer of de Ruiter wondered to himself, "[i]s it a *projection* that I hear, a resonance with the original sayings of Jesus, which have recently by scientists, been re-discovered in the Lost Gospel Q?" (de Ronde 2000: 4, emphasis added). Remembers Rebecca, "I clearly remember watching him . . . that year specifically, where he wouldn't say a lot, I would just see that look in his eyes and I would try desperately to interpret that look" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005b: 23).

Even de Ruiter himself seems to acknowledge this projective process. He told interviewer Ojas Th. de Ronde, "[t]he energy in the audience is so high because people are hearing from deeper and deeper *within.* They are *hearing* from the very core of their being" (de Ronde 2000: 2 emphasis added). Thus, the claim in de Ruiter's introductory leaflet that "John can reveal to you who you really are" (Oasis 1999: 2) is somewhat misleading; it fails to acknowledge the contribution of the attendee to his or her own self-discovery. The meetings of the de Ruiter group illustrate how people can "hear from the very core" (de Ronde 2000: 2) in an atmosphere of silence.

Because religious silence can elicit the projection of highly personalized meanings, and because religious seekers are *looking* for personally relevant

revelation, silence is a valuable resource for the de Ruiter group. Flanagan wrote that silence "is a resource to be mobilized if meanings are to be best expressed as unuttered" (1985: 214). An extension of Flanagan's insight would be that the meanings that de Ruiter's communication provides for his followers are *only* expressible, and *only* hearable through silence or vague speech because of their highly personal nature.

Moreover, the follower who perceives this process not as projection, but as a *receiving* of wisdom from de Ruiter, will develop the belief that de Ruiter has an uncanny ability to say 'just the right thing.' In this frame of mind, de Ruiter becomes a master diagnostician, with superhuman powers of insight into the intensely personal needs of his devotees. Anne recalled being "terrified if I ever saw him anywhere [outside of the meetings]," primarily because "I just felt like he could read me and I was always a bit scared of that" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005a: 14-15). These demonstrations of seemingly unparalleled wisdom and fantastic powers of perception reinforce the devotee's belief that de Ruiter is an extraordinary spiritual leader. In short, projection-eliciting silence allows de Ruiter to perform a seemingly miraculous feat, thereby increasing the intensity of the charismatic relationship between him and his followers.

Silence: a Punitive/Dependency-Fostering Tool

The management of silence may also be useful as a *punitive* tool for those who employ a charismatic leadership style. Kipling D. Williams outlined how

ostracism threatens a person's sense of belonging, self-esteem, and feelings of being in control (2001: 60-64). Williams noted that ostracism might even cause a person to question the meaningfulness of existence (2001: 64). Ostracism can take the form of 'the silent treatment' between intimate partners, as well as 'shunning' at the community level.

Some religious leaders use silence, in the form of shunning, as a punitive tool against wayward members of a group. The Amish's use of *Meidung* is an example where the practice of ignoring can serve as a "severe form of punishment against members who act in violation against rules set forth by the elders" (Williams et al. 1998: 122). Gregory Nwoye noted that among the Igbo of Nigeria, silence acts as a "sanction against deviations of members of a village community" (1985: 188). In these examples, those persons shunned face a community that is completely unresponsive to them. They experience non-person treatment, and the opportunity to end this treatment is a strong incentive for wayward members to resume adherence to the group's rules.

At a more micro level, intimate partners also often engage in silent warfare. One frequent result of this use of 'the silent treatment' is a power differential between the giver and the receiver of it. Paraphrasing one of Bruneau's insights, Sommer et al. wrote:

> by failing to respond to another's efforts to communicate, the source gains control over the target by placing him or her in a frustrating and aggravating position. In an effort to relieve the awkwardness of the situation and resume control, the target persists in communication

> attempts, which are met with further silence. The level of control is thereby augmented for the source and reduced for the target (2001: 226-227).

Receiving no response after asking a question can be a devastating experience. The receiver of 'the silent treatment' feels nonexistent to the other person, and thus becomes very aware of a sense of dependency on the other.

This demonstration of dependency can amplify the power differentials that exist in relationships. Brummett noted that, "[s]uperiors may be silent towards subordinates as a mark of their own status" (1980: 290). Thus, people in positions of power can curtail behavior they do not accept or condone through the strategic use of interpersonal silence. This demonstration of power can also prevent further insubordination in the future.

It appears that John de Ruiter uses this punitive aspect of silence in his meetings. Typically, when people go to the questioner's chair to pose a question, they receive responses – though sometimes after a considerable wait. There are times, however, when de Ruiter gives no response, or when the response is so short and esoteric that it seems to ignore the question completely. Most notably, this lack of response has happened when attendees express complaints about de Ruiter or dissatisfaction with their progress in following him. For example, when Joyce de Ruiter confronted her husband about his adulterous relationship with two sisters – clearly a topic that was very significant to Joyce – "John spoke a few soft words about truth and ended the meeting" (McKeen 2000: E7). Another attendee recalled de

Ruiter's response in this instance, "'[t]hen he did not respond at all to her. He just didn't say a thing. And he did not look happy'" (quoted in Piercey 2001). The devastation that this silent treatment inflicted on Joyce was clear to reporter Scott McKeen and to some devotees. McKeen wrote, "[i]nside, Joyce mourned, as a few of her husband's disciples came up to hug her and tell her they admired her honesty" (2000: E7).

In subsequent meetings, other followers of de Ruiter expressed crises of faith brought on by de Ruiter's adultery and polyamory. Olivia remembers witnessing a woman "freaking out" at John, telling him that "'I only come because I have a lot of friends in this group . . . I don't believe in it anymore and what you did to Joyce'" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 16). John's reputed response to this outburst was that "[h]e stared the whole time and did not break his silence at all in any way – very good control in those situations" (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 16). Despite these instances of expressed frustration, de Ruiter still managed to retain legitimacy in the eyes of many followers. Mary explained the logic of his believers: "for the most part the group has just fallen more in love with him. . . . He is willing to do something that looks so bad and will be so misunderstood, but he'll do it anyways" (Kent [Interviewer] 1999: 25). Thus, de Ruiter's silent non-defense of himself, his 'turning the other cheek' when attacked, fosters the interpretation of his motives in a favorable light by his followers, frustrating and punishing his attackers.

Piercey (2001) documented another instance of de Ruiter ignoring a follower who expressed dissatisfaction in the following excerpt:

> UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN (3): I'm all very confused. I can't really connect with people. I can't connect with myself. It just hurts very much because it feels like being dead.
>
> PIERCEY [CBC reporter]: After contemplating for nearly two minutes, here's de Ruiter's reply.
>
> JOHN DE RUITER: Relax without concern.

Attendee Paul Atreides posted an example of de Ruiter using silence to devastating effect on a weblog on 19 Jan 2004:

> de Ruiter glare[d] into space for 2 full hours while woman after woman supplicated herself "at his feet", teary-eyed, BEGGING for an answer, or some guidance for their questions. NOT ONE WORD IN 2 FULL HOURS. He failed utterly to speak even one word of reflection for these needy people coming to this self ADVERTISED guru of "Truth." Not even an acknowledgement of the importance of their question – mere silence.

Thus, sometimes de Ruiter's use of silence, in the form of ignoring the concerns expressed by his followers in their questions, punishes them while simultaneously increasing their dependency on him.

That de Ruiter is the one who attendees perceive as being the locus of power in such situations is largely due to the *unilateral* direction of the communicative silences between de Ruiter and attendees. This unilateralism

differentiates the silent meetings of the de Ruiter group from those held by certain other religions that practice group silence. For example, the Quakers practice group silence with the aim that each person at the meeting might have "the direct personal experience of the spirit of God within oneself" (Bauman 1983: 23). In contrast to this belief, those who experience interpersonal silence at de Ruiter group meetings are invariably waiting for an *external* satisfaction: the gaining of direction from de Ruiter. The difference between the loci of revelation in these two faiths means that, while Quakerism displays a distrust of authority and an egalitarian quality, the de Ruiter group displays an authoritarian power structure. It would be very difficult to read the silence at Quaker meetings as being a punishment dealt out by an authority figure, but as has been shown, this is precisely the sense in which de Ruiter sometimes uses silence at his meetings.

Clearly, de Ruiter's authority takes on an extraordinary, even superhuman, quality when the mere act of his non-response to questions creates so much distress within his followers. Rudolph Otto's description of *mysterium tremendom* is germane here, in that it describes well a terror that seems to have taken on a transcendent quality. Otto took great pains to distinguish this 'aweful' feeling, which is clearly religious, from normal fear. He explained, "[h]ere we have a terror fraught with inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instill. It has something spectral in it" (Otto 1950: 14). Thus, de Ruiter's use of punitive silence provides an experience of the supernatural, both in the form of the "spectral"

terror in the mind of the punished, as well as to onlookers, for whom the punishments levied by him constitute an astounding display of might. In some religions, the ultimate hell is separation from one's God, and echoed in the pleadings of some of de Ruiter's devotees is the ancient cry, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"(Mark 15:35; Psalm 22:1). It is clear that the only *human* reaction to the intensely personal divulgences and questions of de Ruiter's devotees would be a compassionate, concerned response, and de Ruiter's ability to ignore this compulsion is what marks him out as being superhuman in the eyes of many of his followers

Silence: The Lack of 'Small Talk' and Intimacy

De Ruiter also uses silence to foster the belief within attendees that he has an extraordinary ability to form intimate connections with complete strangers simply by gazing at them. De Ruiter calls these connections "bonds of being" (Oasis 1999a). Schweitzer noted how Weber considered the intimacy between a leader and the followers to be an important component of the charismatic relationship (1984: 67). Weber regarded "emotional union . . . as the culmination of natural charisma;" a state achieved by the "psychological process of mutual identification of the leader and the led" (Schweitzer 1984: 67). The following section focuses on how de Ruiter's management of silence facilitates his achievement of intimacy with his followers.

In contrast to ostracism, where silence seems hostile, silence also can at times denote feelings of intimacy. Studies have linked silent mutual gaze to

physiological arousal (e.g. Argyle and Cook 1976: 2, 21; Mazur et al. 1980). McAdams et al. (1984) also found a positive correlation between the amount of intimacy in a dyadic relationship and the amount of eye contact that the participants in this relationship displayed. Adam Jaworski illustrates this relationship between intimacy and silent stares by presenting an excerpt from Quentin Tarrantino's film *Pulp Fiction*:

> [33 seconds of uncomfortable silence]
>
> Mia: *don't you hate that?* (2)[23]
>
> Vincent: *What?*
>
> Mia: *uncomfortable silences* (2) *why do you feel it's necessary to yak about bullshit* (.) *in order to feel comfortable?*
>
> Vincent: *I don't know* (.) *that's a good question* (2)
>
> Mia: *that's when you know you've met somebody special* (2) *when you can just shut the fuck up for a minute* (.) *comfortably share silence* (Jaworski 2000: 118).

In this passage, Mia suggests that the ability to enjoy silence with someone else can be a sign of intimacy, an implicit acknowledgement that the persona one usually adopts for presentation in public is unnecessary with *this* person. Gudrun Grabher et al. also note, "[t]he sharing of silence among friends, undisturbed by the compulsion to utter meaningful words, is considered a qualifier of friendship" (1996: xi). Thus, silence is inappropriate on a first date, or at a gathering of previously unacquainted people (such as 'mixer'

[23] In this passage, Jaworski uses *(2)* to represent two seconds of silence and *(.)* to represent a silence of less than one second.

functions), because those who are newly acquainted have not yet developed a level of intimacy that would warrant shared silence. People in these situations experience awkwardness in interpersonal silence because here, silence is an *act* of intimacy between people who are not yet intimate.

This aspect of silence can give rise to what the character Mia termed, "yakking about bullshit" – or small talk.[24] Small talk indicates that we are willing to be in contact with a particular person, but that our decision about whether to progress to a level of greater intimacy will come only after we receive more information about that person. Indeed, it seems that people sometimes use small talk deliberately to *bar* this progression towards intimacy, keeping the other at a safe distance. Bruneau wrote:

> long silences in interactive situations may promote informality too fast – making it necessary for cautious persons to halt the informality movement in their own mind[s] by making small talk in order to keep from getting too close (1973: 30).

In a study of social cohesion, Judith Beinstein noted that small talk[25] can "protect the personal space of communicators" (1975: 148). Thus, in certain

---

[24] We must not see the desire to eliminate silence through small talk as contradicting what Goffman perceived as a general rule against opening talk with strangers (1997: 178). In the examples I have presented (the first date and the 'mixer'), there exists a prior commitment between people to spend time with one another, and efforts like small talk make this time pass comfortably. This situation is very different from one involving 'strangers on the street' who have made no such commitment and thus feel no obligation to speak to one another.

[25] Beinstein measured the relative amount of small talk verses more meaningful talk in conversations between service industry workers (beauticians, barbers, and pharmacists) and their patrons, and took these measurements to be indicators of communities' levels of cohesion. Her thesis was that the more people practiced small talk, the less cohesive was their community. Beinstein orders public conversation on a continuum; "at one end . . . we would find no conversation at all; at the other, meaningful discussion topics" (1975: 148). She fits small talk somewhere in the middle (1975: 148). This representation of silence as the opposite of intimacy is of a particular type of silence ('cold silence' i.e. shunning) that is

situations small talk is a strategy for avoiding silence, a tool that people may use to maintain a certain comfortable distance between one another.

The interactive silence between de Ruiter and attendees at meetings does not permit this type of defensive action. The collective silence of the congregation dictates that small talk with one's neighbor is socially unacceptable. The meetings are orchestrated so that de Ruiter is the recipient of all questions; and the aim in *these* conversations is to obtain *profound religious meaning* – the antithesis of 'small talk.' Thus, in the context of group meetings, de Ruiter is free to comport himself towards attendees in a way that simulates true intimacy while recipients of this treatment are prevented from using the distancing techniques that they would otherwise employ with strangers who are becoming too intimate too quickly.

In a CBC television news segment, de Ruiter group member Carol Askew described the deep gazing ritual that de Ruiter performs to begin and end his meetings: "'[h]e touches everybody's eyes but sometimes he lingers in some people's eyes. But he will actually touch everybody's eyes in the room before the meeting'" (quoted in Piercey 2001). Attendee Shane Wilson confirmed this strategy on his weblog:

> For about the last fifteen minutes of the meeting, John simply gazed out at the audience in silence, making eye contact with as many people as possible. He made eye contact with me and I looked away. A minute or two later he looked at me again, I think because I had looked

---

different from the intimate silence I describe in this section. Despite these different characterizations, my agreement with her that people use small talk to stave off intimacy is still germane.

> away the first time. This time I met his gaze and stared back at him. I continued to look into his eyes for the rest of the meeting (2003).

Reporter Jeannie Marshall wrote of her personal experience of attending a meeting: "[h]e stares me down in silence for 12 long minutes. I feel uncomfortable and my vision goes fuzzy fairly quickly. His stare is unwavering and his face is expressionless" (1998: D1).

Thus, the cultivation of silence by the de Ruiter group helps to permit a type of interaction that is usually exclusive to new lovers – deep, silent gazing into one another's eyes. Strangers to de Ruiter find themselves locked in an intimate gaze, and it is not surprising that an attendee may confuse the *act* that usually accompanies intimacy with *actual* intimacy, feeling connected to de Ruiter in a deeply loving way. *Calgary Herald* writer Gordon Legge gave an account of Helen Hamilton, who:

> describe[d] how during her first encounter she melted into de Ruiter's eyes. De Ruiter says that during those intense gazes, he merges his being with other people's being, bypassing their identity. He takes them 'home' (1997: D8).

Olivia recalled:

> there was a lady that had a crush on John and was convinced that he was looking for the right time and he wanted to be her lover and all sorts of different things and I thought more or less, 'wait a minute . . . I thought that was *me*, cause he was looking at me the whole time' . . . I think he was doing it to a lot of women. . . . I think he looks at specific

> people for a period of time, I think he kind of can feel maybe who is getting hooked and maybe he'll give them a little bit more attention for the time being (Joosse [Interviewer] 2005c: 8-9).

Clearly, de Ruiter's ability to connect so quickly with people in a deeply emotional way, partly enabled by his management of silence at group meetings, further convinces devotees of de Ruiter's extraordinariness. There can be no doubt that this 'love at first sight' phenomenon is a large factor in many devotees' decisions to leave home and live near de Ruiter. Thus, the intimacy-fostering quality of interpersonal silence is another way in which interpersonal silence is important for the creation and intensification of de Ruiter's charismatic connection with his followers.

Conclusion

Thomas J. Bruneau wrote, "'Be silent, for so are the Gods,' seems to summarize the highest authority perceptions in Western culture" (1973: 38). This chapter underscores Bruneau's assertion, positing a novel link between interpersonal silence and *charismatic* authority specifically.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of charismatic leadership, as Max Weber described it, is its *instability*. The charismatic leader retains power over subordinates only "so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through 'proving' himself" (Weber 1958: 246). In the cultivation of interpersonal silence, leader John de Ruiter has found an easily replicable method of providing ways for his followers to see him in "divine terms"

(McKeen 2003: B1), by performing seemingly *miraculous feats*. De Ruiter's management of *projection-eliciting* silence fosters the belief that he has the ability to speak to the specific personal needs of people whom he has never met. De Ruiter's silence also sometimes serves a *punitive* function, solidifying beliefs that he possesses an authority of godly proportions. Finally, de Ruiter's use of *intimacy-fostering* silence encourages the belief that he has an extraordinary ability to form intimate bonds with complete strangers, simply by gazing at them.

Perhaps, with further research, these ideas will lend themselves to similar interpretations of the silence of the other gurus mentioned above (p. 91-94). Such research would help to determine whether the three-part taxonomy of interpersonal silence, developed here (comprised of the *projection-eliciting*, *punitive/dependency-fostering*, and *intimacy-fostering* aspects) is complete, or whether it is in need of more categories. For John de Ruiter and his followers, at least, it seems that these aspects are integral to their religious experiences. Indeed, refracted through these aspects, silence is golden.

Chapter Five: Concluding Remarks

Weber commented that "the only basis of legitimacy for [charismatic authority] is personal charisma, so long as it is proved; that is, as long as it receives recognition and is able to satisfy the followers or disciples" (Weber 1958: 52). Regarding the de Ruiter group, there are two spheres in which such concerns of recognition are important. First, devotees' ways of perceiving de Ruiter as *miraculous* are important to the continuance of his charismatic attraction. Second, assuring the primacy of the divine representation in an arena inhabited by non-divine representations is also vital. Guided by my research question,[26] I have sought to give an account of how the group seeks to maintain a climate favorable to the creation and intensification of charismatic relationships in these two spheres.

Limitations of the Study and Paths for Further Research

The account I give of the charismatic relationships in the de Ruiter group is by no means exhaustive. There are many aspects that I have either only mentioned very briefly, or that I have not mentioned at all. For example, many of de Ruiter's followers have claimed experiences of visions during meetings. Devotees clearly experience these visions as *miraculous events* and they are thus contributory factors in the charismatic attractions between de

[26] How do de Ruiter and his group work to preserve the legitimacy of charismatic bonds and create a climate that is conducive to the formation of *new* bonds?

Ruiter and devotees. This thesis does little to examine these visionary experiences. Further research could undertake that task.

In quantitative studies, researchers often attempt to show how the findings of their studies are generalizable to the total population. I make no such claims of generalizability. The sample size is much too small to make such a claim feasible. Furthermore, all of the participants whom I interviewed were women. Though women do outnumber men in the group, there is nonetheless a substantial male population whose experiences have been largely left out of this analysis (though some of this experience shows up in the non-interview data). Further research would need to be more focused on seeking out the experiences of the men in the group. I suspect that this line of inquiry would be especially fruitful for understanding the different qualities of the intimacy that de Ruiter educes with followers.

Contributions of the study

This study has made a practical contribution to the body of research on NRMs in that it presents to the academic community the first research on this hitherto unknown and relatively obscure group. Most NRMs attract academic attention only after reaching a relatively larger size, but a few studies of groups early in their careers have proven to be very valuable in light of their future actions. John Lofland and Rodney Stark (1965), for example, studied the largely unsuccessful conversion strategies of a Korean-based group operating in the San Francisco Bay area in the 1950s. Though the authors

kept the group anonymous at the time, Lofland would later reveal that the nascent group he studied was Reverend Moon's Unification Church (Lofland 1985: 120-121). University of Montana sociologists Robert Balch and David Taylor studied a small and obscure UFO group in the 1970s (Balch and Taylor 1977; see also Balch 1980) which later became Heaven's Gate. In 1997, the group garnered world headlines when thirty-nine members committed suicide, believing that they were shedding their earthly bodies in order to enter the "Next Level." I do not see indications that the de Ruiter group will follow these trajectories—becoming either monumental or suicidal—but neither did the aforementioned sociologists predict the remarkable futures of the groups they studied. At the very least, the insights that I have gained from studying this group will be of value in similar studies of other unknown and emerging religious groups.

Chapter three applies dramaturgical analysis to examine the presentation of the *charismatic* self. Such a combination of charisma theory with Goffman's methods is, to my knowledge, novel, since Goffman's focus was to address self-presentation in *everyday* life, rather than the unusual context that involves religiously charismatic leaders' self-presentations for their followers. Balch perceived the paucity of use of Goffman's ideas in the study of NRMs and went so far as to criticize researchers in the field "most [of whom] seem oblivious to Goffman's work on impression management" (1996: 72).[27]

[27] See also Balch and Langdon's 1998 article in which they criticize the Association of World Academics for Religious Education (AWARE) for its largely apologetic study of the Church Universal and Triumphant. Balch and Langdon title one section of the article, "Has Anyone Read Goffman?" and lament that the researchers involved in the AWARE study seemed not

Although I have attempted to use Goffman's ideas in this thesis, further research is needed to determine whether this combination has theoretically interesting implications for either charisma theory or dramaturgical analysis.

To my knowledge, no researcher has undertaken an examination of charismatic leaders' use of silence in their relations with devotees. The three-part theoretical framework that I developed to examine charismatic silence—consisting of the projection-eliciting, the punitive/dependency-fostering, and the intimacy-fostering aspects— is therefore novel. Because the use of silence within charismatic relationships is by no means rare, it would seem that there is ample opportunity for the application of this model in the contexts of other religious groups.

Finally, the two aspects of the group I study here—its use of charismatic silence and its impression management strategies—occur primarily in the carefully-crafted social space in which group meetings take place. For this reason, the larger, conceptually-unifying, focus of this study has been the way that space and place play a role in the social construction of divine leadership and its corollary, charismatic attraction. Clearly, the construction and management of sacred space is a project that is common to all religions, for it is in these spaces that religion ceases to be merely an assemblage of beliefs, rites, and ethical principles. In these spaces--and in the social relations that they foster--religions live.

---

to understand that, "if potentially discrediting information about malfeasance can be hidden so effectively from members, one can only imagine how well secrets can be kept away from visiting scholars, especially when their fieldwork lasts only a few days" (200).

References

Anonymous. 2005. Post number 15. Posted on September 2. Retrieved from <http://www.kalilily.net/weblog/03/05/25/222427.html> on July 2, 2006.

Argyle, Michael, and Mark Cook. 1976. *Gaze and Mutual Gaze*. Cambridge, London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Atreides, Paul. 2004. Weblog posting (no title). Posted on January 19. Retrieved from <http://www.kalilily.net/weblog/03/05/25/222427.html> (access date: 29/11/05).

Balch, Robert. 1980. "Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult: Implications for the Study of Conversion." *Sociological Analysis* 41.2: 137-143.

---. 1996. Book review of "Sex, Slander, and Salvation: Investigating the Familt/Children of God." *Religion* 35.1: 72.

Balch, Robert and Stephan Langdon. 1998. "How the Problem of Malfeasance Gets Overlooked in Studies of New Religions: An Examination of the AWARE Study of the Church Universal and Triumphant." In, *Wolves Within the Fold: Religious Leadership and Abuses of Power*. Anson Shupe (ed.). New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 191-211.

Balch, Robert and David Taylor. 1977. "Seekers and Saucers." *American Behavioral Scientist* 20.6: 839-860.

Bauman, Richard. 1983. *Let Your Words Be Few: Symbolism of Speaking Silence among Seventeenth-Century Quakers*. Cambridge, London, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press.

Berger, Peter L. 1969. *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969.

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise on the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Doubleday.

Beinstein, Judith. 1975. "Small Talk as a Social Gesture." *Journal of Communication* 25.4: 147-154.

Brummett, Barry. 1980. "Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy". *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66: 289-303.

Bruneau, Thomas J. 1973. "Communicative Silences: Forms and Functions" *Journal of Communication* 23: 17-46.

Bushman, Richard L. 1984. *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Calder, Christopher. (no date). *Osho, Bhagwan Rajneesh, and the Lost Truth.* e-text, no page numbers. < http://home.att.net/~meditation/Osho.html> (access date: 29/11/05).

Campbell, Colin. 2002 [originally published in 1972]. "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization." *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization.* Eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 12-25.

Chetanananda, Swami. 1976. *Swami Vivekananda: Meditation and its Methods.* Hollywood: Vedanta Press.

Davy, Kitty. 1981. *Love Alone Prevails: A story of life with Meher Baba.* North Myrtle Beach: Sheriar Press.

De Ronde, Ojas Th. 2000. *John de Ruiter Interview Transcript: Tenderly Okay Within All.* Conducted February 9. 8 pages . <http://amrita.freeweb.hu/interview.htm.> (access date: 10/11/04).

De Ruiter, John. 1999. *Unveiling Reality.* Edmonton, Canada: Oasis Edmonton Publishing.

Denzin, Norman. K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 1994. "Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research." In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research.* London: Sage Publications, 1-17.

Ellis, Julia. 1998. *Teaching from understanding: Teacher as interpretive inquirer.* New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.

---. 2004. *Presentation on Hermeneutics and Interpretive Inquiry* unpublished handout.

Ellwood, Robert S. and Harry B. Partin. 1988. *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America.* 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2000. "Friendship." In, *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson.* New York: Modern Library.

Flanagan, Kieran. 1985. "Liturgy, Ambiguity and Silence - the Ritual Management Of Real Absence." *British Journal of Sociology* 36.2: 193-223.

Fremenwarrior. 2006. Post number 71. Posted on July 11. Retrieved from <http://www.kalilily.net/weblog/03/05/25/222427.html> on July 30, 2006.

Godman, David. 1985. *Be as you are: the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharishi*. London: Arkana.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Anchor Books.

---. 1997. "Frame Analysis of Talk." *The Goffman Reader*. Eds. Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 167- 200.

Gore, Martin. 1990. "Enjoy the Silence." In, *Violator* (compact disc recording). Sire Record Company.

Grabher, Gudrun M. and Ulrike Jessner, eds. 1996. *Semantics of Silences in Linguistics and Literature*. Heidelberg: Universitatsverlag C Winter.

Guba, Egon.G. and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 1994. *Competing Paradigms In Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications.

Gupta, Mahendranath. 1952. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. (Swami Nikhilananda, trans.). New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center.

Holmes, Oliver Wendell. 1912. "The Music Grinders." In, *The Complete Poetical Works*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Hutchinson, Brian. 2001. "The Gospel According to John." *Saturday Night Magazine* 116.2: 28-36.

Jaworski, Adam. 1993. *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*. Newbury Park, London, and New Delhi: Sage Publications.

---. 2000. "Silence and Small Talk." *Small Talk*. Ed. Justine Coupland. Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd., 110-132.

Joosse, Paul. [Interviewer]. 2005a. "Interview with Anne [pseudonym]," 24 October, 45 pp.

---. 2005b. "Interview with Rebecca [pseudonym]," 12 October, 34 pp.

---. 2005c. "Interview with Olivia [pseudonym]," 22 September, 20 pp.

---. 2005d "Interview with Yvonne [pseudonym]" 13 October, 15 pp.

Joosse, Paul. 2006. "Silence, Charisma and Power: The Case of John de Ruiter." *Journal of Contemporary Religion.* 21.3 (October): 355-371.

Joshi, Vasant. 1982. *The Awakened One: The Life and Work of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.* San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Kent, Stephen A. 1990. "Deviance Labelling and Normative Strategies in the Canadian 'New Religions/Countercult" Debate." *Canadian Journal of Sociology.* 15.4: 393-416.

---. 2003. "Spiritual Kinship and New Religions." *Religious Studies and Theology* 22.1: 85-100.

Kent, Stephen A. [Interviewer]. 1999. "Interview with Mary [pseudonym]," 9 December, 30pp.

King, Frank. 1999. "Self-styled 'truth' teller challenged." *The Calgary Herald.* 30 January: A1, A4 .

Lalich, Janja. 2004. *Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults.* Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press.

Legge, Gordon. 1997. "Messenger of Beingness: Believers think Edmonton man is conduit from Jesus Christ." *The Calgary Herald.* May 31: D8.

Lofland, John. 1985. *Protest: Studies of Collective Behavior and Social Movements.* New Brunswick and Oxford: Transaction Books

Lofland, John and Rodney Stark. 1965. "Becoming a World-Savior: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective." *American Sociological Review* 30: 862-875.

Loome, Jeremy. 2006a. "Why We Believe: Man of vision or ...?" *The Edmonton Sun.* 16 April: 38-39.

---. 2006b. "Why We Believe: Tapping into inner happiness." *The Edmonton Sun.* 17 April: 18-19.

Mann, W. E. 1955. *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta.* Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.

Marshall, Jeannie. 1998. "Shoemaker to Messiah?" *The National Post* 7 December: D1-D2.

Mazur, Allan; Eugene Rosa; Mark Faupel; Joshua Heller; Russel Leen, and Blake Thurman. 1980. "Physiological Aspects of Communication via Mutual Gaze." *American Journal of Sociology*, 86.1: 50-74.

Merriam, Sharan B. 1998. *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.

McAdams, Dan P., R. Jeffrey Jackson, and Carol Kirshnit. 1984. "Looking, Laughing and Smiling in dyads as a Function of Intimacy Motivation and Reciprocity." *Journal of Personality*, 52.3: 261-273.

McKeen, Scott. 1996. "New Age guru attracts loyal following." *The Edmonton Journal*. 17 August: C7.

---. 2000. "I Was God's Wife." *The Edmonton Journal* 16 May: E7-E9.

---. 2003. "Dear John: If you're really a messiah, then give me a call." *The Edmonton Journal* 18 July: B1, B4.

Miles, Matthew B. and A. M. Huberman. 1984. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Morse, Janice M. 1995. *Qualitative Research Methods for Health Professionals*. Thousand Oakes, London, and New Dehli: Chapman & Hall.

Neufeld, Gordon K. 2001. "On (About) Nothingness." [Letter to the editor]. *Saturday Night* 116.3: 7.

"No name." 2005. Posted on September 15. Retrieved from <http://www.iamcal.com/linklog/tags/insane/> on July 2, 2006.

Nwoye, Gregory. 1985. "Eloquent Silence Among the Igbo of Nigeria." *Perspectives on Silence*. Eds. Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike. Norwood, New Jersey: Alex Publishing Corporation. 185-191.

Oasis Edmonton Inc. 1998. *An Evening with John de Ruiter*. Videotape.

---. 1999a. *Bonds of Being*. Videotape. Oasis Edmonton Inc., 45 min.

---. 1999b. *John de Ruiter*. (introductory leaflet). <http://www.awakentruth.org/johnintro.html> (pp. 1-4) (access date: 11/12/04).

---. 1999c. *Stillness in a Hurricane*. Audiotape # 154. Edmonton, Oasis Edmonton Inc., December 5, 6, and 12.

---. 2000. *John de Ruiter Speaks about Truth: Innermost Blossoming*. Videotape.

---. 2002. *Inventory and Sales Department Product Mail Order Form*. Edmonton: Oasis Edmonton Inc.

---. 2003a. *John de Ruiter Speaks About Truth* (introductory pamphlet). Edmonton: Oasis Edmonton Inc.

---. 2003b. *Volunteer Application*. Edmonton: Oasis Edmonton Inc.

---. 2004a. *Edmonton Retreat Coordination: Retreat Registration Form*. Edmonton: Oasis Edmonton Inc.

---. 2004b. *Distribution of Meeting Notes Policy*. Edmonton: Oasis Edmonton Inc.

---. 2006a. "John de Ruiter Gracefully Reveals the true essence of philosophy, religion, and psychology . . ." Retrieved from <http://www.johnderuiter.com/Seminar/images/edm_seminar_large.jpg > on July 14, 2006.

---. 2006b. "An Introduction to the Integrated Philosophy of John de Ruiter." Retrieved from <www.johnderuiter.com> on July 13, 2006.

---. 2006c. "Literature." Webpage retrieved from <http://www.johnderuiter.com/Literature/Lit_Speaks_6.html > on July 20, 2006.

Oasis Edmonton Inc. and John de Ruiter vs. Jeanne Parr. Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta. Action no. 0103 24617.

Oasis Edmonton Inc. and John de Ruiter vs. Boots Beaudry. Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta. Action no. 0503 00938.

Oasis Edmonton Inc. vs. 996399 Alberta Ltd. Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta. Action no. 0303 07753.

Oshana, Dave. "Oshana Enlightenment Now: Teachers: John de Ruiter." Retrieved from <http://oshana.org/teachers/john_de_ruiter.html> on July 20, 2006.

Osho. 2000. *Autobiography of a Spiritually Incorrect Mystic.* New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Otto, Rudolph. 1950. *The Idea of the Holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational.* 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

P., Andrew. 2002. "Two Evenings with John de Ruiter." *Energy Grid* June: e-text, no page numbers. <http://www.energygrid.com/spirit/2002/06ap-deruiter.html> (access date: 11/12/04).

Packer, Martin J. and Richard B. Addison. 1989. *Entering the Circle: Hermeneutic Investigation in Psychology.* Albany: Sany Press.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods.* 2nd ed. New York, London and New Dehli: Sage.

Pedersen, Rick. 1993. "Christianity 'Satan's Masterpiece.'" *The Edmonton Journal* 20 February: C2.

Piercey, Judy. 2001. "The Gospel According to John." *The National Transcripts.* Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2 February: e-text, no page numbers. <http://www.tv.cbc.ca/national/trans/T020201.html> (access date: 22/11/04).

Purdom, C.B. 1937. *The Perfect Master: Shri Meher Baba.* London and Woking: Unwin Brothers.

Raine, Susan. 2005. "Reconceptualising the human body: Heaven's Gate and the quest for divine transformation." *Religion* 35: 98-117.

Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schweitzer, Arthur. 1984. *The Age of Charisma.* Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Sina, Ali. "5. 'Muhammad was Illiterate and Cruel' (AS)." No date or page numbers. Retrieved from < http://19.org/index.php?id=72,199,0,0,1,0 > on July 20, 2006.

Sommer, Kristin L., Kipling D. Williams, Natalie J. Ciarocco, and Roy F. Baumeister. 2001. "When Silence Speaks Louder Than Words: Explorations Into the Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Consequences of Social Ostracism." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 23.4: 225-243.

Stark, Rodney and William Sims Bainbridge. 1985. *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation.* London: University of California Press.

T., Amanda. *Nonverbal Communication of Charismatic Leaders: the Use of Eye Communication by John de Ruiter.* Unpublished paper for Dr. Stephen A. Kent's Sociology 441 class.

Toliver, Wendy. 2004. *The Little Giant Encyclopedia of Inspirational Quotes.* New York: Sterling Publishing Company.

Twain, Mark. 1959. *The Autobiography of Mark Twain.* New York: Harper Brothers.

Weber, Max. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization.* Ed. and trans. A.M Henderson and Talcott Parsons. New York: Oxford University Press.

---. 1958. "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority." In, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology.* Eds. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press, 1958. 245-252.

"Who." 1967. *Maha Yoga or The Upanishadic Lore in the Light of the Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana.* (6th ed.). Tiruvannamali, India: T.N. Venkataraman.

Whitsel, Bradley C. 2003. *The Church Universal and Triumphant: Elizabeth Claire Prophet's Apocalyptic Movement.* Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

Williams, Kipling D. 2001. *Ostracism: The Power of Silence.* New York and London: The Guilford Press.

Williams, Kipling D., Wendelyn Shore and Jon Grahe. 1998. "The Silent Treatment: Perceptions of Its Behaviors and Associated Feelings". *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 1.2: 117-141.

Wilson, Shane. 2003. "Messiah or Cult Leader?" Posted on October 5. Retrieved from <http://www.everythingalberta.com/blog/archives/2003_10.html> (access date: 29/11/05).

"Withheld." 2005. Post number 14. Posted on August 29. Retrieved from < http://www.kalilily.net/weblog/03/05/25/222427.html> on July 2, 2006.

Appendix A: Letter to potential participants and consent form

[Date]

Dear [Name of potential participant],

I am writing to ask whether you be interested in participating in an interview with me on the topic of your experiences as a member of the religious group led by John de Ruiter.

I am currently working to complete the requirements of a Masters degree in the Sociology department at the University of Alberta. I would like to do the interview as part of the research for my thesis.

If you were interested in participating, our interview activity would have three parts. As part one, I would ask you to do a pre-interview activity in which you would make a diagram, time-line, or other visual representation about some of your experiences related to the interview topic. As part two, we would meet for approximately one and a half hours to discuss the visual representation and to use some of my interview questions to invite your reflections and memories about the interview topic. The interview would be scheduled at your convenience. As part three, after I had studied the audio recording of the interview, I might ask you to clarify one or two points from our discussion in an interview of approximately half and hour in length.

Your participation is voluntary. You would be free to withdraw at any time. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you would be withdrawn from my thesis. A tape recorder will be used to record our interview and I will transcribe the tapes. Although I cannot guarantee to maintain your anonymity, I will use a pseudonym to represent you in all work that is written about the interview and I will keep your interview tape, visual representation and transcripts locked in a secure place for a minimum of five years following completion of this research activity.

I do not foresee any harm resulting from this activity. Instead, people often find the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to be beneficial.

If you have any further questions about the interview activity, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxxx. Please complete the attached consent form to indicate your decision. If you are willing to participate, please return the consent form to me. Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

[signed]

Paul Joosse

Informed Consent Form

Project Title: The Experience and Meaning of Silence among Believers in John de Ruiter

Researcher: Paul Joosse

_____ **No**, I do not choose to participate in the research project.

_____ **Yes**, I agree to participate in the research project.

I give my consent to be interviewed for this thesis research. I understand that the interview will be recorded on tape. I understand that only the investigator, Paul Joosse will have access to the audio tape and transcripts of the tape. I understand that Paul Joosse will attempt to keep the information I provide anonymous by not referring to me by my name or location, but by using a pseudonym. I also understand that although Paul Joosse will attempt to preserve my anonymity, this anonymity cannot be absolutely guaranteed. I understand that the information I provide may be used in a thesis produced by Paul Joosse. I understand that I will be asked if the materials produced in the pre-interview activity might also be used as a part of the thesis.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time before Paul Joosse commences writing his thesis on February 1, 2005. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer specific questions, and/or to withdraw my participation at any time during or between interviews. I understand that participation in any aspects of the study is voluntary and that my interview activity has three parts: doing a diagram or drawing, an interview of roughly one and a half hours, and a follow-up interview of approximately half an hour.

Name of participant (Please print):

_____

Signature of participant:

_____

Date _____